

—censorship in time of war is readily accepted by the public, if only grudgingly by the media;

—debate over public policy whether in Congress, on the street or on campuses is necessarily complex and requires considerable context;

—war coverage is necessarily multifaceted and complex, requiring stories about politics, economics, geography and social custom;

—new technology associated with the gathering and transmission of news by satellite is both a blessing and a curse. It brings information faster and provides better visual display; but it does not necessarily build public support in or for the media's overall performance; and

—relative newcomers to the news business like CNN could outdistance better-heeled broadcast and print competitors through a competitive edge aided by technology and assured by economics.

These and other lessons of war would condition the media as the war emerged not just as so much jingoistic talk, but as a harsh and inevitable reality.

Ironically, for some media executives early public opinion soundings seemed contradictory. As one editor asked plaintively, "how can 85% of the people support the war; 80% support the president and only 60% approve of us?" The old refrain of "why do they hate us out there?" which led to the media credibility crisis of 1984, was raised anew.

Whether the role of the media in informing the public about the Gulf war and in setting an agenda for understanding it will be found to have had a greater impact and influence than in the past, is something researchers will have to tell us later. But this may be the first important test in our new "age of information," when cities are wired and public communication is more abundant than ever before.

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THE WAR, THE MEDIA, AND THE PUBLIC

By J. Ronald Milavsky

The war with Iraq is in at least one respect like all other wars: most Americans know it only as a mediated reality. We learn about it from media depictions and reporting.

Information coming to us about this war is sparse and highly selective. Much of what we might want to see is unavailable to any news media's cameras or human eye-witness, either because of the logistical difficulties in getting to battle and damage sites, or because the military prevents access. The images which do reach us are different than in previous wars. They are "live", the video equivalent of Edward R. Murrow's radio reporting from London rooftops. These bits of live war action and military and civilian press briefings, interrupt an otherwise steady flow of analyses from a very large number of experts, the television news organizations' back-up when live action images are not available.

What has been the reaction of Americans to the way this war has been reported? To answer this, we draw on both television ratings data, to examine the pattern of exposure to the war news, and on survey data to learn about usage of other media and about qualitative aspects of reactions to this mediated experience.

Television Viewing

Within minutes of the beginning of Allied bombing of Iraq, there was a massive turning to television for information. People had been primed to expect something by the UN-imposed deadline of January 15 for Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait. Data supplied by the Cable News Network (CNN) show that during the last full week before the start of bombing, CNN averaged 2.0 rating points for weekdays and 1.7 rating points on the weekend among the 60% of the country's households that subscribe to the network. These ratings were just a little higher than CNN achieved during the same week a year earlier. On January 14 and 15, the two evenings before the bombing's onset, CNN's ratings for the 8 pm to midnight time period increased to an average of 4.2. This means that 4.2% of all those television households were tuned to CNN during the average minute on those nights—almost three times what CNN averaged during the same week a year earlier.

On the 16th, the night the bombing started, news of it traveled mostly electronically. A CBS News/New York Times survey of January 17 found that the great majority heard about the bombing first directly from the media;

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only 10% heard from other people. That first night, CNN's ratings zoomed to 19.1, outperforming ABC, CBS, and NBC in its own universe of households—an historic first, even though the other networks' ratings also increased. The fact that CNN was the only network with a live transmission from Baghdad was easily discovered by most of the country who have remote controls for tuning, and probably was a major factor drawing so many to its audience. But CNN had come close to beating the regular networks on previous occasions when big news was breaking.

The night of January 16 was easily CNN's best performance; their ratings have since declined steadily. The average of the ratings for the first two weekend evenings declined to 9.4. Each subsequent weekend the ratings dropped from those of the weekdays immediately preceding it, and each 5-day weekday average was lower than that of the preceding five weekdays. As of the latest Monday through Friday period available when this article went to press (February 11-15), CNN's 8 pm to midnight ratings had deflated to an average of 3.9—a little lower than they had been in the two days before the bombings began.

Ratings made available for ABC, CBS, and NBC by A.C. Nielsen, including a special tabulation for the week the bombing started, show a pattern similar to CNN's. Both the morning and evening news programs increased their ratings over 1990 in the week before the bombings, the week of the bombings and the week after. The first week of war (which contains two pre-war days), increased most (+2.8 points for evening news, +4.0 for morning news). All the ratings in the week after the bombing declined from the first war week. Increases for the "big three" networks in their news time periods were modest compared to those experienced by the all-news CNN during the 8 pm to midnight timeslot. In any case, taken together with the CNN ratings, television news watching increased markedly as a result of the outbreak of war, and then fell off.

People certainly turned to television for the first breaking news about the war. Did they also turn to other media? We lack equivalent data for radio or print press. However, press reports have indicated that street sales of newspapers also increased in the days immediately following the war's onset, and then also subsequently declined.

As far as people's subjective impressions are concerned, there was a substantial short-term increase in reliance on television and a decrease in their reliance on other media. Illustrative are data from a Roper Center/Institute for Social Inquiry poll of adults in Connecticut. When asked in the four days prior to January 16 where they got most of the news about what's going on in the

Persian Gulf, 47% of Connecticut adults singled out television. This percentage jumped to a high 64% in the four days after the outbreak of hostilities. But by January 29 to February 1, the percentage choosing television declined to the pre-outbreak level. Before the beginning of bombing, newspapers were the main source for 18%. This dropped to 6% in the first four days of the war and rose only to 8% by January 29-February 1. But the "Other" response, which consists primarily of combinations of media, did show a substantial increase. These opposing trends for television and for print indicate that television is the primary source for breaking news. They raise the question, which cannot be answered yet, of exactly what role newspapers now play in such crisis reporting.

How should we interpret the decline in the intense concentration on television for breaking war news with each passing week? There are at least two hypotheses. First, the news about the conduct of the war was very reassuring in the early going, lessening the need to monitor for possible disaster. Second, it may also be that, despite the spectacular images of "smart" high-tech weaponry at work, those seeking new information found they didn't get enough news in return for the viewing attention expended. The unique images of war and other crises are good for the news business, but it takes a constant flow of new information about developments to sustain that business.

The Public's Evaluations of the Press Coverage

Thus far, evaluations of the news media have been positive. Seventy-eight percent said in late January that the press was doing an excellent or good job overall; and 72% believe the media were trying hard to get the story independently of what the military was telling them (Princeton Survey Research Associates for Times Mirror, January 25-27, 1991). The public deemed the reporting both accurate (Table, item 1) and balanced (Table, item 2), although considerably more people said they had heard too much about the views of those opposed to the war than said they had heard too little (Table, item 3). Two-thirds of Americans believed in mid-February that the US military was holding back information about the war (CBS News/New York Times, February 12-13, 1991), but 57% maintained the military should exert *more* control over how news organizations report the war (Table, item 4). (To place this latter belief in perspective—a similar question in December 1941 provoked a nearly identical response, see Table, item 5.) People believe that rather than hiding bad news, the military is telling all they should under the circumstances (Table, item 6).

Of all the above results, the opinions which support military censorship are the most dismaying to those like

the news media who believe that society is best served by the free flow of information. Why does the public support such control? Again we have hypotheses but little to support them. Perhaps at the onset of a "just" war, where US forces are engaged, people feel that society is best served for the time being at least by support of the military effort. In addition, in the early stages of the war, which has broad support and which is going so well for the allied side, confidence and trust in the military are high; that, too, supports the belief that they are reporting everything they can report. In fact, the public had as much confidence in the military as they did in the press to give an accurate picture of the war (Princeton Survey Research Associates for Times Mirror, January 25-27, 1991). There can be no doubt the public felt during the Gulf war that the nation was better served by military control over information than by its unimpeded flow.

L'Affaire Arnett

The reporting from Iraq has been characterized by some critics as Iraqi propaganda; Peter Arnett of CNN in particular has been accused of aiding the Iraqi side and hurting the Allied cause. Although equal numbers in late January supported and disapproved of "American news organizations broadcasting news from Iraq that has been

censored by the Iraqi government" (Table, item 7), a majority of Americans by mid-February felt that having reports cleared by Iraqi censors was better than no reporters in Iraq at all (Table, item 8), and that reporters were gathering valuable information that might be reported after they leave (Table, item 9). When Iraqi censorship was not mentioned, 51% approved of Arnett and other news organizations broadcasting from Iraq and 38% disapproved (Gordon Black/USA Today, February 14, 1991).

When this piece went to press in late February, the picture which had emerged about Americans' evaluation of the media's performance in reporting the war was neither simple nor logically consistent. But it makes sense. People supported the media's efforts to inform us, and they also backed the military control of information. They were a long way from branding as traitors reporters who provide censored news from Iraq and wanted them to continue their reports. They saw the necessity of censorship on our side, and were not afraid of harm to the nation from reports censored by the other side.

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Table

1. "How much confidence do you have that the press is giving the public an accurate picture of how the (Gulf) war is going?"

Note: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates for Times Mirror, January 25-27, 1991.

A great deal of confidence	26%
A fair amount of confidence	59
Not too much confidence	11
No confidence at all	2
Don't know	2

2. "Do you think the media has been too negative in their reporting of the war (with Iraq), too positive, or do you think it has been just about right?"

Note: Survey by Gordon S. Black Corporation for USA Today, January 20, 1991.

Too negative	8%
Too positive	13
Just about right	69
Don't know	10

3. "Have you heard too much, too little, or the right amount about the views of Americans who oppose the war in the Gulf?"

Note: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates for Times Mirror, January 25-27, 1991.

Too much	47%
Too little	13
Right amount	33
Don't know	7

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4. "Do you think the military should exert more control over how news organizations report about the war or do you think that most decisions about how to report about the war should be left to news organizations themselves?"

Give military more control	57%
News organizations should decide	34
Don't know	9

Note: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates for Times Mirror, January 25-27, 1991.

5. "Which of these two ways of releasing war news to the public do you favor?"

Let newspaper reporters and radio commentators handle the war news as they are doing now	36%
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Note: Survey by the National Opinion Research Center, December 1941.

Have official government spokesmen write the war news for the papers and broadcast it over the radio	55
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Don't know	9
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6. "Do you think the United States military is hiding bad news (about the Gulf) from the public or do you think it is telling the public as much as it can under the circumstances?"

Holding back bad news	19%
Telling as much as it can	78
No opinion	3

Note: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates for Times Mirror, January 25-27, 1991.

7. "Do you approve or disapprove of American news organizations broadcasting news from Iraq that has been censored by the Iraqi government?"

Approve	43%
Disapprove	45
Don't know	12

Note: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates for Times Mirror, January 25-27, 1991.

8. "Which do you think is preferable—having American reporters in Iraq reporting only those stories that have been cleared by the Iraqi government censors, or having no American reporters in Iraq at all?"

Reporters in Iraq	65%
No reporters in Iraq	26
Don't know/No answer	9

Note: Survey by CBS News/New York Times, February 12-13, 1991.

9. "Some people say that the United States media should not carry reports from CNN's Peter Arnett and other journalists in Baghdad because the reports are too controlled by the Iraqi government and serve as enemy propaganda. Others say such reports should be carried—with proper labeling—because they are better than no reports from inside Baghdad and because the journalists are gathering valuable information they can report after they leave. Which comes closer to your view?"

Not carry reports	28%
Should carry reports	69
Don't know/Refused	3

Note: Survey by the Gallup Organization for Newsweek, February 15, 1991.