

The "Grunt Truth" of Embedded Journalism: The New Media/Military Relationship

By Kylie Tuosto

The following article is an exploration and critique of the media-military relationship during times of war. War correspondence has always required a difficult balance of censorship and free press, but with advances in technology and the use of embedded reporters, the problem has grown quite complex. This article argues that in addition to the classic problems of objectivity in war correspondence, the use of embedded reporters has also led to an unprecedented media-military collaboration. A collaborative effort by both the government and the so-called "free press" allows for a pro-war propaganda machine disguised as an objective eyewitness account of the war effort in Iraq. The problems exposed in this article have greater implications for the media and government relationship at large and open doors for further research and exploration of war correspondence in general.



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Embedded journalists make scenes like this one from Jalulah, Iraq accessible to the American public, but at what cost?

*“We didn’t want to be in bed with the military,
but we certainly wanted to be there.”*

– Marjorie Miller, editor of the *Los Angeles Times*

American journalism today has evolved such that several market-driven determinants strongly affect the outcome of printed news. With the internet’s vast supply of free information comes a media dependency on advertisers looking to appeal to an audience determined by the stories and journalists chosen by the owners and investors. In the Pulitzer-Hearst era, journalists created sensational stories to gain greater circulation, as evidenced by the incitement of the Spanish-American War in 1898. This lavish misuse of hyperbolized events led to the coining of the term “yellow journalism” used to describe the intentionally misleading “news”. With the current war in Iraq, “embedded reporting” can now be added to the list of terms coined and used to represent both the cooperation, and the mistrust between the American government and the American news media. In times of war, there is a delicate balance between government censorship of war correspondence and the right of the press to produce unregulated news stories. In essence, both rely on each other for propagation of war sentiment and both have the power to destroy each other’s credibility with the American public. As Naval Reserve Commander Jose L. Rodriguez states, it is “a mix of cooperation and tension.”¹

In Vietnam, the lack of an official declaration of war prevented the US military from making any formal regulations, thus it was forced to request that correspondents practice voluntary censorship. In 1971, the military created the Wartime Information Security Program to control the media, which quickly became obsolete as technology developed and there was no longer a need for field censorship. Without a formal contract between the military and the press, correspondents reported critically on the effectiveness of US intervention. Editors at home, however, reflected only military reports of success in Vietnam, and while some newspapers criticized military

Kylie Tuosto is a sophomore with plans to major in Product Design/Mechanical Engineering. She became interested in issues of journalism while taking a class with the Program in Writing and Rhetoric, and has decided to pursue a minor or secondary major in Communications to continue writing and studying journalism. She is especially interested in continuing to research the problems created by war correspondence and embedded journalism. Through her studies, she hopes not only to gain technical knowledge of engineering, but analytical skills as well, and may one day use these skills to pursue a career in law.

tactics, few, if any, questioned US policy. Then, in 1968, the Tet Offensive changed the media’s perspective on war. As American troops began to lose significant battles for the first time, the public and press began to challenge America’s decision to continue the fight in Vietnam. Ultimately, as journalists began reporting on the futility of sending more troops, the military began to blame the press for a lack of pro-war sentiment and the war’s stalemate. Similarly, the press blamed the military for lying about the situation in Vietnam and trying to mislead the public. The mistrust between the military and the media that was established in Vietnam is a sentiment that continues to be felt by both sides today.²

In the war in Iraq, the media and military continue to look for a balance between censorship and free press. Whether to alleviate tension or to gain political and militaristic control, the Pentagon decided to be proactive about setting up safe media relations for the war in Iraq. Unlike previous attempts to keep the press away from the battlefield, the Pentagon established a system of “embedded” reporters, “a media representative remaining with a unit on an extended basis – perhaps a period of weeks or even months.”³ In contrast, the term “unilateral” defines any un-embedded journalists who are not associated with a military unit, but instead are independent journalists, freelance journalists, or even journalists associated with a media organization. According to the ground rules established in an official unclassified government report from 2003, the purpose of embedding the media is “to facilitate maximum, in-depth coverage of US forces in combat and related operations.”⁴ However, policy 2.A. reveals a military interest not only in in-depth coverage, but also in public perception:

Media coverage of any future operation will, to a large extent, shape public perception of the national security environment now and in the years ahead. This holds true for the US public, the public in allied countries whose opinion can affect the durability of our coalition, and publics in countries where we conduct operations, whose perceptions of us can affect the cost and duration of our involvement.⁵

This declaration of strong US military interest in public perception of war reveals an obsession with the interaction between media and military and a dedication of both sides to cooperate in order to “tell the factual story – good or bad – before others seed the media with disinformation and distortions, as they most certainly will continue to do.”⁶ Both the media and military claim to strive for truth: “[T]he public demands objectivity and journalists

strive to achieve it, even though critics say they miss the mark. Even if the traditional notion of objectivity as an absolute standard is often unattainable, to abandon the concept altogether would open the door to undisciplined, irresponsible journalism.⁷ And in order to effectively and efficiently relay “the factual story,” the Pentagon has chosen to embed media representatives. While appearing to be a perfect solution to the unsolved problem of unbiased and in-depth war correspondence, this new practice creates several unprecedented difficulties for both journalists and their readers.

The argument of this paper is twofold. First, it argues that embedded war correspondence in Iraq magnifies three specific types of biases inherent in all journalism: *reader-response bias*, *editorial bias*, and *sacrificial bias*.⁸ Then it expands this analysis of the limitations of objectivity to suggest more broadly that the effect of embedded reporting on the American public is a distraction from and desensitization to war, as well as a perpetuation of American overconfidence in military ability. Moreover, as the sexual tension inherent in the word “embed” implies, the intimate nature of the media-military relationship is fundamentally incestuous, insofar as it is an illicit transgression of the principle of freedom of the press. Though it attempts to propagate pro-war sentiment and alleviate American apathy, embedded reporting has actually given birth to an unprecedented hyper-dramatization of war.

“There are no facts, only interpretations.”

Reader-Response Bias in the American News Media

Journalism is not simply investigative reporting for the sake of finding truth; it is a capitalist enterprise with a market and consumers to which it must cater. In other words, a reporter will alter content and rhetoric based on a newspaper, magazine, or television station’s audience, in order to best serve that audience’s needs. In war correspondence then, considering the audience means that a journalist will inevitably censor the reality of war at his discretion. War correspondence is particularly conducive to censorship not only because it exposes the predominantly naïve American public to the brutality and ruthlessness of war, but also because the families of soldiers have a right to learn of their loved one’s death in a respectful, tactful, and formal way. These pressures mean that embeds not only practice self-censorship, but also receive limited information and are denied intimate details for the sake of secrecy and military strategy. Because “unit commanders may impose temporary restrictions on electronic transmissions

for operational security reasons,”⁹ an additional layer of censorship evolves, which is essentially out of journalists’ control. Similarly, the bias inherent in an embed’s inability to see the larger picture of war contributes to a stratified filter of information that exemplifies the limitations inherent not only in the biases explored here, but in the restrictions placed on embeds as well. Despite necessary militaristic regulations, journalists wary of audience and public opinion practice self-censorship. This self-censorship is not only an inherent lack of objectivity, but also serves to create a fabricated version of reality.

Ultimately, self-censorship creates a relativization of information as it distorts reality through the eyes of the reporter. As embedded war correspondent Gordon Dillow writes, “The discomforts and dangers of the war were easily dealt with; accurately conveying the reality of it to the readers back home was not.” He continues to justify his lack of objectivity by rationalizing, for example, that omitting the routine expletives of soldiers “was unavoidable” since “it wouldn’t fly in a family newspaper, [and] neither would the constant jokes about sex and bodily functions.” Dillow’s article reveals not only his paternal over-protectiveness, but demonstrates a level of censorship that equates military personnel to singing schoolchildren. He even admits that the problem is obvious: “The result was that the marines sounded much more like choirboys in my stories than they really are.” While he concedes the point that his stories do not accurately convey reality, he claims, “I didn’t hide anything. For example, when some of my marines fired up a civilian vehicle that was bearing down on them, killing three unarmed Iraqi men, I reported it – but I didn’t lead my story with it, and I was careful to put it in the context of scared young men trying to protect themselves... and sweet-faced, all-American boys hardened by a war that wasn’t of their making.” Dillow’s strong connection with his soldiers, as well as his sense that “some things are simply too gruesome to describe in detail,”¹⁰ caused him to take liberties with censorship, writing only what he deemed necessary and proper for a family audience. The problem thus becomes an inherent lack of objectivity that is paradoxically disguised by Dillow’s openness and honesty with his reader: in admitting a lack of objectivity, Dillow gains credibility with his reader, who might then mistake his honesty for the truth value that his story actually lacks.

Dillow’s argument is in itself a contradiction as he states that he both omits nothing and censors expletives and gruesome details for a family audience. This paradox emphasizes the fact that his reporting is in no way representative of objective truth. This is not to say, of course, that his article does not contain truth. In fact, he states

that “the point wasn’t that I wasn’t reporting the truth; the point was that I was reporting the marine grunt truth – which had also become my truth.”¹¹ With respect to the reader-response bias, his “marine grunt truth” is in fact the “marine-grunt-truth-as-is-appropriate-for-an-American-family-audience.” Dillow’s blanket justification for a lack of fact-based truth and his hasty relativization of truth opens the door to irresponsible journalism. If journalists abandon the pursuit of objective truth in favor of relativized truths grounded in personal experience and edited for audience consumption, then who will provide the audience with that necessary degree of objectivity? The question quickly becomes one of truth value in which truth is measured by an arbitrary and subjective gradient. It is unreasonable and illogical merely to generate truth labels in order to compensate for a lack of fact-based truth value in one’s reporting.



Can embedded reporters be objective?

Dillow’s obligation to objectivity forces him to fabricate not necessarily a story, but a truth value, for the sake of catering to an audience that only wants to hear the censored “marine grunt truth.” This choice suggests that the portrayal of war is affected by a desire to shape the opinions of the American public: journalists’ self-censorship for the sake of catering to an audience skews the necessary reality of a story, making it subjective to and reliant on the people who, in reality, know nothing of the war itself. Embeds, however, are not the only ones attempting to cater to war sentiment at home. News media editors must also take into account the reaction of the American public, and as such, impose their own opinions on the stories received from embeds, altering both content and scope in the hope of providing what they feel to be a larger and more balanced perspective.

“There is more than one way to burn a book.”

Editorial Bias in the American News Media

All journalists are employed by and accountable to their editors, and thus must be wary of editors’ opinions. In political journalism, especially, reporters must be cautious of how their own political views measure up to those of their editors. War correspondence, however, has an entirely different effect on this reporter-editor dynamic. With the advent of technologies like satellite phones and lightning-speed digital imagery, war reporting in Iraq not only produces real-time correspondence, but a large volume of information which many media outlets send home to editors for rewrites before presenting the story to the American public. Both the relative speed of relayed information and the use of rewrites create an unprecedented problem of convoluted subjectivity.

In a panel discussion entitled “The LA Times Goes to War,” Marjorie Miller, the editor of *The Los Angeles Times*, speaks to the success and value of embeds as well as to the responsibility of editors in organizing their information. “The embeds,” she says, “were valuable as mosaic pieces. But they could only see as far as they could see and it was up to Tracy and Tyler [rewrites] to begin the process of putting some of those little pieces of the puzzle into perspective.”¹² While the initial purpose of embeds was to provide up-close firsthand war coverage, the media still seems to rely on two secondhand observers sitting in their comfortable LA office chairs to both rewrite stories and put them into perspective. Unlike past wars in which correspondence was telegraphed from military commanders, the American public now relies heavily on other American citizens who have not experienced war at all to relay valuable information. For embedded correspondence, information is relayed in real-time, and so the use of rewrites is equivalent to acquiring written notes from onsite reporters several thousand miles away only to be written into a story for the not-so-war-hungry American public. Clearly, liberties are taken with the information relayed through embedded reporters – liberties that are rather deceptively represented as an unavoidable balancing act: “What you were getting from the military, from Iraq, from allied countries, from other unallied countries was going into a main bar in LA....We were trying to balance the relative weight of all of that information.”¹³ This approach may attempt to cover all ground as objectively as possible, but the mere use of a central editing hub narrows the scope of all incoming correspondence and filters it through the eyes of *LA Times* editors like Marjorie Miller, a process that introduces significant problems of subjectivity.

War correspondence politics are also quite complex in other news media outlets. After all, nationwide polls found that 86 percent of viewers received their news about war from television¹⁴ and more specifically, 70 percent from cable television.¹⁵ From the beginning of the war, television stations chose a particular stance on the conflict and continued to feed each report into an editing filter of patriotism, jingoism, or in rare cases, objectivism. According to Julia Fox and Byungho Park's statistical analysis of objectivity in embedded war correspondence, of the three largest cable television networks – Fox, CNN, and MSNBC – CNN was “more objective in its coverage of the Iraq War...[and] attempted to bring different viewpoints to viewers with segments such as ‘Voices of Dissent’ and ‘Arab Voices.’” Fox and Park even quote a reporter with the *Chicago Tribune* who “criticized Fox [News] for its subjective reporting of the war [saying], ‘We deride Fox News Channel for saying “us” and “our” in talking about the American war effort, a strategy that conjures images of gung-ho anchor Shepard Smith, like Slim Pickens in *Dr. Strangelove*, riding a Tomahawk straight into Baghdad.’” Columnist Clarence Page also disapproves of Fox “for embracing the language of the Bush administration in its newscasts. It calls suicide bombers ‘homicide bombers’ and refers to the war to unseat Saddam Hussein as America’s war to ‘liberate Iraq.’”¹⁷ Statistics from viewer polls support these findings, as viewers say that Fox had a “great deal of media bias” 43 percent of the time compared to CNN, for which viewers saw a “great deal of media bias” only 27 percent of the time.¹⁸ These comparisons are only examples of the wide range of bias created by the media editing filter. Simply by watching Fox as opposed to CNN, one is more likely to gain a biased understanding of the war in Iraq. With respect to my argument, the stories fed by embeds are more likely to be altered or skewed by editing when editors preemptively choose a particular stance based on politics at home. An examination of editorial bias demonstrates the relative ease with which an already subjective embed’s story can be made subjective not only to the opinion of the American public, as is the case with reader-response bias, but the opinion of news media editors in reaction to American politics and domestic war sentiment.

“I may have been recording my own obituary.”
Sacrificial Bias in the American News Media

In a capitalist society, reporters must sell any story at a good price, regardless of its level of objectivity, and are willing to get a good story at any price; a price that, in the case of embedded reporters, is often one’s life. Reporters

and even the American public at large must ask themselves whether it is necessary to use embeds to obtain the most in-depth and objective coverage, and if so, whether embedded war stories are worth the loss of more American lives. Jane Arraf, CNN’s Senior Baghdad Correspondent and unilateral reporter, does not think so. In a panel interview with Michael Fumento and Paul Rieckoff on *The Al Franken Show*, Arraf replies to Fumento’s criticism of unilaterals by saying, “there [have] been more than 60 reporters killed. Reporters don’t have to go to Baghdad, take the risk of flying in, being hit by missiles as they’re flying, go on that road to the green zone where they might be blown up. They can easily stay in Jordan...”¹⁹ Arraf continues to argue that it is often unilaterals who gain a better understanding of the war, as they have the ability to speak Arabic with the Iraqi people and understand both the experience of Iraqis and the plight of the American military.



Defenselink

Are embedded journalists journalists, soldiers, or both?

But many reporters, like Michael Fumento, believe that risking one’s life is necessary for getting the best story. In his article, “Covering Iraq: the Modern Way of War Correspondence,” Fumento writes with great respect for embeds: “If you don’t have the guts actually to cover the war, stand aside for those who do.” His disgust for “hotel-bound credit-claimers,” resounds prominently throughout his article, making his position abundantly clear. A photograph along with the article shows his late editor Michael Kelly, who was killed while embedded in Iraq, and is accompanied by a caption that reads, “Embeds die in Iraq, not members of the Baghdad Brigade,” referring to the “rear-echelon reporters” otherwise known as unilaterals. “[With] the sole exception of Steven Vincent, the only American journalists killed or even seriously injured by hostile action in Iraq have been embeds.” Quoting Harry Truman, Fumento writes, “If you can’t stand the heat, get

out of the kitchen.”²⁰ While such impassioned rhetoric reinforces the skewed and opinionated nature of his article, Fumento also writes that when asked where he would want to be embedded, he replied, “the redder, the better,” claiming a willingness to sacrifice his own life for a story by embedding himself in the most dangerous war zone.²¹

Unlike Fumento, photographer and journalist Stephanie Sinclair is unsure of her willingness to risk her life for the best pictures. In a recent PBS documentary on embedded journalism, “War Feels like War,” Sinclair reflects on the danger of her current situation. “I’m a little wary. I really don’t want to get hurt. It’s just not worth it to me at this point. I don’t really know enough about covering wars or any sort of real violent subject matter.”²² Sinclair, who plans on continuing war correspondence for 15 more years, is still afraid of what she might lose: “I definitely don’t want to go out on my first one. Not only would it be a bad way to die, but it would be a pretty bad way to be remembered.” Photographer Marco Di Lauro of Getty Images, on the other hand, claims that war hardens reporters. In a conversation with Stephanie Sinclair, Di Lauro states that over time, experience in the field will change a reporter’s willingness to sacrifice for a story: “You will be ready to kill another photographer for a better picture like everybody else is.”²³

Regardless of whether or not the inherent risk of embedded reporting is justified by more objective and in-depth coverage, an embed’s ability to report objectively is affected by a personal willingness to sacrifice life. Like Di Lauro, NBC News Middle East Correspondent Richard Engel thought the war would harden him. And, in a way, it did. According to Engel, he went through four stages during the embedding process:

Stage 1: I’m invincible. I’m ready. I’m excited. I’m living on adrenaline. Then as the war begins, Stage 2: You know what, this is dangerous, I could get hurt over here. And that starts to sink in. Then the war continues and friends start to get kidnapped or killed and you see bodies on the streets. Stage 3: I’ve been over here so long, I’m probably going to get hurt. And then at a certain stage, you hit rock bottom and you feel, I’ve used up my time. Stage 4: I’m going to die in this conflict. And that’s a dark place to go into.

When Engel reflects upon his five years in Iraq, he wonders, “Has it been worth it? All the sacrifice? I think it has.”²⁴ But even if the sacrifice is “worth it,” does greater sacrifice necessarily translate into more objective coverage?

A reporter’s willingness to risk his life for a story creates problems both on an individual level as well as for war correspondence as a whole. It is tempting to think that

the more a reporter is willing to sacrifice, the better the story. However, a reporter can become desensitized to trauma and no longer relate to the American public on a human-interest level. The reverse can also be true: a reporter willing to sacrifice his life for a story might be overly sensitive to the horrors of war and thus sensationalize suffering in stories. In either scenario, the amount of risk a reporter is willing to take with his life does affect the objectivity of the story and ultimately allows emotion to creep into a human-interest piece as a desire for sympathy and pity – that is, sympathy and pity for the reporter, not for the soldiers. At this point, it is necessary to consider how sacrificial bias affects objectivity; whether the risk of death is ethical and, further, what risking civilian lives reveals about American capitalism with respect to the media. Why are Americans willing to risk more civilian lives in order to vicariously experience an intimacy with war? Does this willingness arise from national pride and a desire to justify overseas occupation? For that matter, a consideration of editorial bias suggests the following question: why doesn’t the media save time, money, and lives by having Tracy and Tyler just write the stories from home?

It is possible that Americans are more than willing to overlook reader-response, editorial, and sacrificial bias due to a fascination with military strength, power, and domination – feelings that manifest themselves in embedded war correspondence. Rather than being concerned with the loss of objectivity, embeds fuel a fixation on technologically-advanced weaponry and the feelings of power that these weapons engender. In his article, “Grunts and Pogues: The Embedded Life,” embedded reporter Gordon Dillow recalls the feelings of calm and strength he gained through being able to hold a grenade given to him by one of his marine grunts: “It had been more than 30 years since I’d held a grenade, and I knew that my having it violated written and unwritten rules. Still, it felt comforting in my hand.”²⁵ In the heat of the struggle, the marines, as well as Dillow, were willing to disregard military regulations for the sake of saving their own lives. If this is the case – that during times of war, when life is at risk, the rules do not apply – then a host of implications can be drawn from the controversy that embedded reporting causes. For example, where exactly is the line between embed and soldier? As colleagues “[who] operate as a part of their assigned unit,” should embeds be expected to take fire for fellow soldiers?²⁶ The ground rules would disagree. But when do the rules actually apply? When it comes down to life and death, objectivity is not merely impossible; it is the last thing on anyone’s mind.

***“You can’t objectively cover both sides
when I’m guarding your butt.”***

A Military Opinion of Embedded War Correspondence

Both soldiers and veterans of the US military have their opinions of embeds, and the consensus seems to be a lack of breadth of scope. Dillow’s article, while written about his own experience, provides a unique, secondhand account of the initial skepticism his marine grunts held for embedded reporters:

They had been warned about us, I found out later. Be careful what you say to them, the Marines of Alpha Company were told before we joined them in early March...Don’t [complain] about the slow mail delivery, don’t criticize the anti-war protesters back home, don’t discuss operational plans, and for God’s sake, don’t use ethnic slur words for Arabs. Better yet, don’t talk to the reporters at all. They’ll just stab you in the back.²⁷

To Dillow’s surprise, the marine grunts not only saw embeds as an annoyance and an additional man to cover, but were initially suspicious of Dillow’s loyalties. After getting to know the men of his unit, Dillow explains that “they realized that we weren’t using our Iridium cell phones to alert the Iraqi army high command to the Marine’s next move.” Subsequently, Dillow was able to develop both trust and camaraderie with his soldiers. Eventually, the soldiers’ initial mistrust grew into a desire to have their stories told accurately and affectionately to their loved ones at home. To the Marines of the Alpha Company, Dillow’s “marine grunt truth” would suffice.²⁸

Paul Rieckhoff, an Iraqi war veteran devoted to the cause of bringing troops home from Iraq, does not agree that the embeds’ reports are sufficient representations of truth. He argues that while embedded reporting sometimes produces useful media, the fact is that embeds are not getting the full story. He further suggests that it is impossible for embeds to report objectively when they, like the soldiers, must have a battlefield mentality. Rieckhoff makes this view clear not only in his book *Chasing Ghosts: Failures and Facades in Iraq: A Soldier’s Story*, but also in a panel discussion along with Michael Fumento and Jane Arraf on *The Al Franken Show*. Al Franken, the show’s host, quotes Colonel Johnson as having once said, “Every man thinks meanly of himself for not having been a soldier.” Rieckhoff addresses this quite frankly:

A lot of reporters really covet the [military] experience....They like going over there. And they want to get their reporting chops. And we used to call them in the military “jock sniffers.” They wanted to be part of

the action. And I’m not saying this of all reporters, but there are some elements of that. And in my opinion, if you’re embedded, you’ve compromised some of your journalistic integrity. You can’t objectively cover both sides when I’m guarding your butt. And I’ve been there with embedded reporters and I think some of them do a great job. And I think honestly, Ms. Arraf, you’re doing a wonderful job at CNN, but you’re still only getting one side of it for the most part. You can’t independently operate without US military protection now. So you’re still only getting a very narrow understanding. And I think most of the people who have been there will admit that.²⁹

Rieckhoff’s statement sparked heated debate among the other two panelists, Arraf and Fumento. Franken, playing the devil’s advocate, immediately suggests that the best and bravest reporters are men and women like Jill Carroll and George Packer - “the people who have gone through that country without being embedded.” Arraf strongly agrees and argues that embedding is not necessary to knowing the country and the people well. For instance, she states that “there are places you cannot go now without being embedded,” yet, if you “know the country as I do, you go there, [and] can actually speak Arabic to the Iraqis,” which, as she explains, is both necessary and sufficient in understanding the story in Iraq. Fumento, on the other hand, suggests that unilaterals are getting too comfortable sitting on the sidelines reporting secondhand information without actually experiencing what the soldiers experience. But perhaps it is actually the embedded journalists who exhibit a “false bravado,” as Arraf claims, because they are attempting to credit themselves with a combat mission.³⁰

In his article, “Covering Iraq: The Modern Way of War Correspondence,” Fumento addresses Rieckhoff’s comment by saying, “Rieckhoff, an anti-war vet who was hawking his boring book...labeled those who actually go into battle with troops as ‘jock sniffers.’ To him, the Ernie Pyles and Joe Rosenthals of America’s past were just a bunch of contemptible groupies.” Fumento continues to mock Rieckhoff’s statement by projecting his term “jock sniffers” onto journalist heroes of the past, where, under the photo of the famous flag raising at Iwo Jima, Fumento’s caption reads: “The most iconic image of World War II, by ‘crotch-sniffer’ Joe Rosenthal.”³¹ Fumento’s response demonstrates the sharp contrast between the view of a soldier and that of an embed. While they might get along in the field, tension between the two still exists. Rieckhoff’s proposed solution is more balanced, as he argues not for the factual storytelling of a soldier’s plight, as one might expect from a veteran, but rather for the combination of correspondence gained by embeds, unilaterals, and non-

American war correspondents. Ultimately, both Dillow's and Rieckhoff's accounts of soldiers' responses to embeds reveal the complexity surrounding an embed's inability to objectively view both sides while resisting the distractions of camaraderie, fear of the enemy, and pressure from soldiers to communicate their stories compassionately. Despite the military's skepticism of embeds and the tension created by mistrust in Vietnam, embedded reporting has changed the way the military views the media. As Commander Rodriguez points out, "The shift in the military's perspective of the media from that of an adversary to an ally was central to the mission" in Iraq and ultimately to the development of a symbiotic relationship between media and military.³²



US National Archives

The raising of flag at Iwo Jima as captured by photographer Joe Rosenthal.

Distraction, Desensitization, Arrogance **The Effect of the Media-Military Conspiracy**

The media-military relationship does not simply cause a biased collection of war correspondence. In order to rally pro-war sentiment, justify America's desire to spread democracy, and glorify the American soldier, the media and military have teamed up to create a Hollywood-esque dramatization of the Iraq War, transforming reports on combat from a relay of unbiased facts to a red carpet media event. Together, they are manufacturing entertainment rather than offering information. In doing so, the media-military partnership has effectively distracted and desensitized the American public, strategically utilizing American overconfidence in war ability in order to justify the use of civilian embeds.

Distraction **Preoccupying Americans with Journalism**

Embedded reporters, whether they intend to or not, are keeping Americans occupied with stories of war correspondents rather than stories of war. By introducing embeds in the war in Iraq, the media-military machine is providing Americans with a convenient distraction: one in which embeds continue to glorify themselves and lead Americans to believe that they are winning a war, while the military continues to make poor decisions in Iraq that go completely unnoticed. Embed and foreign correspondent, Robert Kaplan, comments on this phenomenon in his article, "The Media and the Military," which attempts to justify the media-military intimacy created by the "embed phenomenon." He writes, "The Columbia Journalism Review recently ran an article about the worrisome gap between a wealthy media establishment and ordinary working Americans. One solution is embedding, which offers the media perhaps their last, best chance to reconnect with much of the society they claim to be a part of."³³ Embeds may be attempting to relate to the working American public, but in reality, their presence on a battlefield makes this "reconnection" impossible. Still, he continues, "the hundreds of embedded journalists aren't just reporting on this war; they're serving as surrogates for all civilians. And they've given the story a visceral immediacy, a that-could-be-me feeling."³⁴ And it is precisely this feeling that keeps the public's attention drawn towards the media rather than the true heroes: the men and women of the American military who are dying in service of a country instead of the embeds who are "dying" to get a story. By creating this distraction which focuses attention on the death count of reporters rather than on the death count of soldiers and Iraqis, the media-military mechanism is operating a machine that symbiotically serves the interests of each. Should the Pentagon make a mistake with military strategy, it can simply force embeds to comply with the orders of the unit's commander. Similarly, the media gains inside access, which, as discussed above, is inherently biased, but the American public continues to believe that reporting from within troop operations leads to a closer representation of truth. Both at home and in Iraq, there seems to be an overwhelming notion that the true story is "embedded" in daily troop operations, and that with access comes an omniscient understanding of war. In reality, this complete understanding comes not from embeds whose scope is narrowed by limited information, but from a range of sources and stories able to contribute to a more objective truth.

The distraction caused by embedded reporting takes the form of a theatrical dramatization. "At first there is a build-up and expectancy of a Hollywood script about to unfold, but then reality hits and we are reminded that

war feels like war,"³⁵ says journalist PJ O'Rourke. Instead of a Hollywood script, complete with the gut-wrenching thriller scenes of war movies like "Black Hawk Down," there is only bizarre uncut film of cameramen chasing soldiers through fields. War may feel like war, but it certainly does not look like it. Not only does this raise questions about the relationship between Hollywood and news media, fiction versus reality, but for those who have never experienced war, it begs the question: what does war actually look like? Ironically, the documentary, which is intended to expose the condition of necessary unilateral reporters, actually gives insight into what war might look like if there were no reporters in the field at all, and, instead, a video camera were simply left in the war zone to shoot uncut, unedited reels. Surprisingly, war does not have the rushed thrill of the Hollywood renditions. While at times soldiers are excited by the action and begin throwing around meaningless expletives, the reality of war appears to be a slow, daunting march towards an untimely and inevitable death.

This march, however, does not end in Iraq. With increasing ubiquity, embedded reporting has become a phenomenon that cannot restrict itself to war coverage overseas. In transforming war correspondence into a cinematic narrative, journalists have followed wounded soldiers home, reporting directly from hospital beds. "The idea was simple," writes Anne Hull. "If the Pentagon was embedding journalists with military units in the invasions of Iraq, why couldn't it apply the same principle inside the nation's largest military hospital?" In her article, "Proposing a Variation on Embedded Reporting," Hull recounts her experience as a reporter embedded in the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC. Hull writes, "We'd locate ourselves inside a military hospital to explore the physical and psychological aftermath of war." The media-military machine thus does not stop in Iraq, but continues to impose itself upon soldiers at home. "We wanted a counterpoint to the ongoing stories and imagery of tanks rolling toward Baghdad, and Pentagon officials point at maps. It was time for a gut check. The casualties were starting to come home."³⁶ Hull claims that once the terror and excitement of war is over for the wounded, they come home to an uncomfortable environment in which they become outcasts from mainstream society. However, as "War Feels like War" clearly demonstrates, the physical hardship of war is surprisingly similar to the hospital experience. This parallel demonstrates two realities: first, uncut war footage is not equivalent to the common Hollywood-esque perception, as demonstrated by uncut film. Second, the term "embed" is becoming a token of Operation Iraqi Freedom, showcasing a heroic embedded icon that displays the

media-military intention of distracting the American public from combat and military operations in Iraq.

However, the media-military scheme does not stop with the embed icon. Rather, it forces a dramatization of the military experience similar to the one provided by war imagery used in film production, which inherently sensationalizes combat in order to sell movie tickets. This move raises the question: to what extent does the news media attempt to take its cues from or even compete with Hollywood in order to retain a captive audience? While that question is not within the scope of this paper, it is worth considering that, to some extent, the news media must obtain a universal audience in order to make money and, in so doing, must compete with other forms of media, both entertainment and "infotainment." It is easy to see how the news media might become susceptible to the habit of sensationalizing reality for the sake of selling stories. However, embedded reporting is the result of a combined effort, both media and military, to dramatize the war in Iraq.

Desensitization

American Apathy for War

This distraction then becomes part of an overall desensitization to the horrors of warfare, which is evidenced by the American public's indifference towards war. The surrogacy provided by embedded reporters is inherently contradictory in that it claims to offer a reconnection to and a link between war experience and the American audience. Yet, in reality, it merely serves as a filter through which Americans might read someone else's experiences and someone else's reaction to war. Short of having all civilians take military-assisted tours through Baghdad, it is quite impossible for the public to experience war; perhaps reporters are the closest substitute for personal experience. However, due to the inherent lack of objectivity, embedded reporters in particular may not be the best substitute, as they become a filter that actually puts one personal human experience between reality and the audience. In this sense, Americans are faced with the impossibility of personal experience and the dissatisfaction of being once removed from war itself. It serves only to create more apathy for and desensitization to war: after seeing the most gruesome pictures and reading the most glorified war stories, the American public is simply tired of trying to connect with war when, in actuality, it is not even possible. American apathy for war is not only a problem for pro-war, Operation Iraqi Freedom supporters, but, as Paul Rieckhoff can attest, it is a problem for soldiers coming home from Iraq as well. "There's a war going on over there," says Al Franken,

“and most Americans just don’t relate to it at all.” It is the one thing Franken, Arraf, Fumento and Rieckhoff all agree on. “They [the American people] live life uninterrupted,” says Paul Rieckhoff. “It is patriotism light...and my biggest criticism of this administration is that they haven’t asked the American people to do anything.” To this, Fumento points out that every unit with which he was embedded complained, “Why don’t the folks back home know what we’re doing here?” - a question to which Fumento responds, “I’m afraid that a good part of the explanation is that reporters aren’t getting out to them.”³⁷ This indifference to war becomes frustrating for reporters as well as for soldiers returning home. MSNBC’s embedded foreign correspondent Richard Engel speaks to this undeniable apathy from a journalist’s perspective. In the onset of war, during the “Shock and Awe” Campaign “everyone wanted to know every sound and picture and image that we could get out of Iraq. Now five years later we have a huge infrastructure in the country, but the interest level has dropped dramatically. And that is one of the frustrating things, when you’re in Baghdad and you want to tell a story and people don’t want to listen.” Even two years ago, claims Engel, Americans were more interested in stories of conflict in Iraq. “Now nobody asks anymore. People don’t want to hear it even on a personal level.”³⁸ Even Engel’s family and friends grow tired of the constant reminder of their own lack of participation in the war effort. American apathy, then, seems to come from the guilt “every man [feels] for not having been a soldier,” as well as from the media’s contribution to the public’s perception of war.³⁹

Out of necessity, the American public gets information from the news media. If the media cannot report objectively, then it is reasonable to expect very little interest from the American public in return. The sheer volume of information overwhelms Americans so that they either disregard the war altogether or naïvely accept the representation of war from whatever article or photo happens to slide across their desk on Monday morning. Part of this apathy and lack of concern stems from the comfortable lives most Americans live and the confidence and pride they seem to have in the nation’s supreme military and weapons arsenal. So long as Americans feel that their presence in Iraq is morally justified by the spread of democracy, citizens will not be able to feel any of the effects of war – especially so long as there are no direct repercussions for the individual. American overconfidence leads paradoxically to an apathetic attitude towards war: what should breed patriotism actually generates both arrogance and indifference.

Arrogance

How Embeds Contribute to American Egotism

American overconfidence can be characterized not only by an inherent belief in US military superiority. The mere use of embeds exposes the relative ease with which both Americans and the military are willing to allow civilians on the battlefield, despite the obvious danger. Moreover, as becomes apparent in the ground rules of embedded reporting, the military is bending over backwards in order to take care of extra personnel. The ground rules state that the “use of priority inter-theater airlift for embedded media to cover stories...is highly encouraged, [and] units should plan lift and logistical support to assist in moving media products to and from the battlefield so as to tell our story in a timely manner.”⁴⁰ The implication is that if soldiers want their stories told, they should be ready and willing to help the media in any way possible. Both an exaggerated effort by the military to accommodate media embeds and a willingness to risk more American lives supplement embedded journalism’s contribution to a growing problem of American egotism, which ultimately leads to a lack of separation between government and free press. By teaming up and taking sides, the news media are waving the American flag, helping the Pentagon promote support for Operation Iraqi Freedom and, by extension, support for the current administration. In fusing together what should be entirely independent operations, the media-military cohort creates a pro-war dramatization that is based on an entirely un-American relationship.

In the past, media-military cooperation has been much less conspicuous. For the sake of keeping free-enterprise free, the relationship depicted most prominently in public has been one of mistrust and competition between the media and military. With the advent of embedded reporting, however, the public has the unique opportunity to fixate its wartime anxieties on the “embed” icon, a courageous journalist heading off to war. This shift, however, is not to say that embedded reporting was previously unimportant. Michael Fumento, in response to comments by screenwriter-director Nora Ephron, said, “Embedding was [not] an evil idea dreamed up for this war....In World War II and later wars, all major news outlets had reporters with the troops on the front lines. That’s how we got the incredible dispatches of Ernie Pyle, and the wonderful Iwo Jima flag-raising photo by Joe Rosenthal.”⁴¹ Fumento correctly suggests that both Joe Rosenthal and Ernie Pyle made significant contributions to war journalism in their time. The term “embedding” arose during this war, but the idea of having journalists on the front lines preceded it. Thus em-

beds are becoming a tool of the media-military machine in serving as surrogates to the American public for an experience they cannot sufficiently or accurately communicate.

The disparity between the actual war experience and what is being relayed to the American public is apparent to both the media and the military. Thus, there is a need to fill the gap with a fabricated story surrounding the reality in Iraq. In doing so, the media and the military have entered an illicit relationship in which both parties effectively take advantage of one another, resulting in a theatrical production suited for the unknowing American public. What embedded reporting shows is a de-secularization of an American enterprise in favor of increasing fictionalization, militarization and politicization. Where the first amendment once separated the powers of media and government by providing checks and balances to establish an independent press, the media and military are now accomplices in the creation of a Hollywood-esque dramatization of war in Iraq used to propagate pro-war sentiment at home as well as justify America's presence in overseas conflict.

"In bed with the military."

A Sexual Interpretation of the Media-Military Relationship

Perhaps unwittingly, the Pentagon's choice of the word "embed" implies a sexual pun that illuminates the transgressive and incestuous nature of the media-military relationship. "This time, the military said, 'we're going to embed reporters.' We had never heard that word before and we were not sure what it meant," says Marjorie Miller, editor of the LA Times. "We didn't want to be in bed with the military, but we certainly wanted to be there. And we didn't know if it was a trick or if...they, for some reason that we couldn't fathom, had decided to give us access." This incestuous intimacy between the media and military, has become an unprecedented exploitation of the concept of freedom of the press. Not only are both parties disregarding the notion of a free and independent press, but both are exploiting one another's resources for their own benefit. "A newspaper of our size is a lot like the military. We have to decide how many people to deploy, what equipment we need, how many troops, what our tactics are going to be, get the supplies..." claims Miller, in a questionable comparison of media and military operations.⁴² Her argument, however, merely blurs the line separating media and military, while Fumento's interest in "false bravado" begins to erase it. Fumento and Arraf argue incessantly over which reporters, embeds or unilaterals, are braver and more courageous. Words like "bravery" and "courage," however

are traditionally associated with soldiers. Should not the bravery of our military personnel rather than that of our journalists be most important? Recently, Robert Kaplan published an article titled "No Greater Honor," in which he comments on "what it takes to earn the highest award the military can bestow—and why the public fails to appreciate its worth."⁴³ Meanwhile, embedded war correspondent Richard Engel has been named the 2007 winner of the Medill Medal for Courage in Journalism. "Chosen for his outstanding work in War Zone Diary," Engel is praised for revealing "the unsanitized and often grim truth" of the war in Iraq. Richard Stolley, a judge of the Medill Medal, writes of Engel's accomplishment, "This brilliant, deeply personal story defines both the qualifications for and the need for the Medill Medal."⁴⁴ Though his diary is a biased and personal exploration, Engel is given what might be the journalistic/military equivalent of a Medal of Honor. Courage, bravery, and honor, once solely associated with military achievement are now tokens of a "false bravado" and an attempt to credit embeds with combat missions.

What was first confusion between what is military and what is media now becomes an incestuous and exploitative relationship between the two. Paul Workman, a Canadian journalist, criticizes the role of embedded reporting in allowing the war to be "covered...by a press corps that's sleeping with the winner," thereby accusing the media of sexually exploiting the military.⁴⁵ However the relationship between the media and military works both ways. Robert Kaplan writes that when embeds return home from a stint with the military, journalism professors often question whether the "embedded journalists have become, in effect, 'whores' of the armed forces."⁴⁶ Dillow corroborates this claim as he recalls his soldiers' desire to have their stories told accurately to loved ones back home. "But the biggest problem I faced as an embed with the marine grunts was that I found myself doing what journalists are warned from J-school not to do: I found myself falling in love with my subject. I fell in love with 'my' marines."⁴⁷ Despite any effort to remain objective, the seductive ways of the military somehow overwhelm reporters, ultimately creating a charged tension between reporters and soldiers, media and military. This tension breeds a unique war dramatization meant not only to entertain, but to distract and desensitize the American public to the harsh realities of war overlooked and convoluted by the media-military machine.

"There's a fine line between being embedded and being entombed."

The End of Eyewitness Journalism

Perhaps neither party is to blame. Perhaps it is not an elaborate scheme or a political conspiracy meant to deceive the American public. Rather, the situation can be conceived of as the result of primitive human instinct. The incestuous relationship between media and military could be merely a retrospective interpretation mapped onto what is an undeniably complicated situation. When men are capable of instantaneously killing thousands of other men, when the lives of others are being placed in their hands, when all it takes is one bullet, it is impossible to remain unbiased, impossible to not take sides, impossible to remain independent of the man on your right. At the same time, the effect of embedded reporting on the American public's view of war must be considered; as a result, a critical examination of the media and military's overt willingness to cooperate and corroborate is imperative. To the extent that both parties intend to capitalize on a cooperative relationship, the effect is a paradoxical reconceptualization of the up-close eyewitness war correspondence of previous wars. World War II correspondents Joe Rosenthal and Ernie Pikes created iconic images and stories, establishing a glorified war-metaphor for the American public. Unlike the great journalists of the past, however, embeds themselves are attempting to replace the heroic soldier by becoming the icon idolized by Americans. This evolution of war correspondence has created significant problems for the American perception of the global implications of the war in Iraq. Paradoxically, the media and the military are creating both an overwhelming apathy for war and a subconscious desire for soldier human-interest pieces, both of which side-step the important and objective issues of war in favor of total access to information that is ultimately filtered into a self-affirmation of American principle. In a post-September 11th world, the media and military have reached an unprecedented level of cooperation through the use of embedded reporters, calling into question the platonic separation of government and press which lies at the heart of American journalism. §

ENDNOTES

- 1 Jose L. Rodriguez, "Embedding Success Into the Military-Media Relationship" (United States Naval Reserve, Pennsylvania: Carlisle Barracks, 2004), <<http://stinet.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA423760&Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf>> (accessed 2 May 2008).
- 2 "War Reporting & Technology," Newseum. <<http://www.newseum.org/warstories/technology/flash.htm>> (accessed 2 May 2008).
- 3 "Public Affairs Guidance on Embedding Media During Possible Future Operations/Deployments in the U.S. Central Commands Area of Responsibility," 3 Feb 2003, <<http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Feb2003/d20030228pag.pdf>> (accessed 3 June 2008), Sec 2.C
- 4 Ibid., Sec 2.C.ss
- 5 Ibid., Sec 2.A.
- 6 Ibid., Sec 2.A.

- 7 Julia Fox and Byungho Park, "The 'I' of Embedded Reporting: Coverage of the 'Shock and Awe' Campaign," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 50.1 (2006): 36-51, 40.
- 8 I have conceptualized these four biases in particular because they offer, I think, a valuable understanding of the various aspects of journalistic bias in war correspondence.
- 9 "Public Affairs Guidance," Sec. 2.C.
- 10 Dillow, "Grunts and Pogues."
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- 12 Marjorie Miller, "The Los Angeles Times At War in Iraq," "War & Media," Sibley Auditorium, UC Berkeley, 16 Mar. 2004, <<http://journalism.berkeley.edu/conf/mediaatwar/schedule.html>> (accessed 2 May 2008).
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- 22 War Feels Like War, Dir. Esteban Uyarra, UK: In Focus Productions, 2004, DVD.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Richard Engel, Interview, "Reporting from Baghdad," *TODAYshow*, MSNBC, 3 June 2008 <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21134540/vp/23698279#24947195>> (accessed 7 June 2008).
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- 28 Ibid.
- 29 "Special Iraq Panel."
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Fumento, "Covering Iraq."
- 32 Rodriguez, "Embedding Success."
- 33 Robert D. Kaplan, "The Media and the Military," *The Atlantic Monthly*, Nov. 2004, <<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200411/kaplan>> (accessed 7 June 2008).
- 34 Fox and Park, 37. Quoting W. Powers, "Darkness and light," *National Journal* 35 (12): 932.
- 35 War Feels like War, DVD.
- 36 Anne Hull, "Proposing a Variation on Embedded Reporting," *Nieman Reports* (2004): 69-71, <<http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/04-3NRfall/69-71V58N3.pdf>> (accessed 3 June 2008).
- 37 "Special Iraq Panel."
- 38 "Richard Engel NBC News Middle East Correspondent/Beirut Bureau Chief," MSNBC, <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/5424809/>> (accessed 6 June 2008).
- 39 "Special Iraq Panel."
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- 44 Suzanne Hagen, "News Releases: Medill Medal for Courage," Medill At Northwestern University <<http://www.medill.northwestern.edu/newsreleases/archives.aspx?id=83889>> (6 June 2008).
- 45 Workman, "Embedded Journalists Versus 'Unilateral' Reporters."
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Journalism, they continue, thus seeks "a practical and functional form of truth." It is not the truth in the absolute or philosophical or scientific sense but rather a pursuit of "the truths by which we can operate on a day-to-day basis." The publisher of journalism "whether a media corporation answering to advertisers and shareholders or a blogger with his own personal beliefs and priorities" must show an ultimate allegiance to citizens. They must strive to put the public interest "and the truth" above their own self-interest or assumptions. The new journalist is no longer a gatekeeper who decides what the public should and should not know. The individual is now his or her own circulation manager and editor. While the military and embedded media both seek to serve the public good "the military via defense of national security and embeds by ensuring that civilians back home are fully informed of the nation's foreign policy and wartime commitments" there are nevertheless conflicts that can arise between the two. These conflicts arise because of competing requirements. Successful military operations require the element of surprise, and this entails secrecy. In contrast, military embeds and the media in general seek transparency in their reporting. Nonetheless, modern warfare necessitates a relation... Embedded journalism, the practice of placing journalists within and under the control of one side's military during an armed conflict. Embedded reporters and photographers are attached to a specific military unit and permitted to accompany troops into combat zones. Even media organizations who participated in the embedding program described it as an attempt to present the U.S. side of the war in a sympathetic light by absorbing reporters into the culture of the military and tainting the objectivity that journalists are bound to uphold. One advantage of embedding was that it added a measure of protection for journalists who sometimes found themselves the target of violence by one or more sides in a conflict.