

Embedded journalism



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1. In the realm of media-military relations, Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) has become synonymous with the concept of ‘embedding’. The Pentagon defines ‘embed’ “as a media representative remaining with a unit on an extended basis” and OIF represents the single greatest instance of embedding. The Pentagon offered 920 embed spots, and, from 775 acceptances, eventually managed about 600 positions from more than 250 national and international media agencies. The British Ministry of Defence (MOD) also authorized 128 embeds from British media outlets. Thus, a “global army of reporters, photographers, and television and radio crews” deployed to a conflict that would “be the most covered war in history”. Correspondents had “never...worked alongside U. S. military units...in such numbers [or] in such an organised fashion” and the magnitude of embedding was “unprecedented for a conflict involving the U. S.”

2. Nevertheless, embedding did not originate in OIF. The U. S. first embedded journalists in World War II and about 40 landed ashore with U. S. troops on D-Day. The MOD later embedded correspondents with British personnel in the 1982 Falklands War. Then in 1991, a Washington Post reporter advanced with the Marines, essentially as an embed, in Operation Desert Storm (ODS). Limited embedding also existed in Operation Applied Force (OAF) in 1999.

3. The supremacy of U. S. forces has perhaps aided the emergence and expansion of embedding programs. Indeed, since the Vietnam War, inferior adversaries have given Western forces significant latitude in developing press-military relationships. The implementation of wide scale embedding in OIF illustrates this point but GEN Mattis, Commanding General 1st Marine

Division said: “ Before we as a military society congratulate ourselves on the ‘ overwhelming success’ of the embed program, we need to remember that we were both good and lucky. What would have been the headlines if the coalition lost a battalion of infantrymen in a chemical attack? What if there was more nationalistic spirit in the hearts of the people of Iraq and a majority of the population fought us block-by-block?[iii]”

4. The ultimate test of the robustness of an embedding program could actually be in a war against a technologically advanced adversary, which exploits embeds for tactical gains. This adversary: would likely possess the systems to capitalise upon compromises in operational security and target a headquarters with strike assets; would have analytic processes to escalate an embed based violation into a compromise of operational security; and could turn broadcasts into a compromise of operational security by using them to ascertain the journalist’s and collocated troops’ precise location.

This could have occurred in OIF. U. S. forces confiscated journalists’ Thuraya satellite phones because their global positioning function could allow a technically sophisticated adversary to pinpoint the phone’s signal and launch a missile strike against a reporter’s military unit[iv]. Embeds also would be in heightened danger if an adversary could project greater lethal force, and decimated or overrun units could reveal tragic imagery with harsh publicity for the military.

Finally, in a war of ‘ national survival’, first-order obligations pertaining to that survival are likely to overturn second-order constitutional and legal obligations, probably at the cost of media preferences such as embedded

journalists. In a war of national survival, ejecting embeds may be understandable; however, this would negate a crucial point by the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard. He reasoned that nations might have waged war differently in the previous century if embeds had reported extensively on battlefields and in headquarters. The Prime Minister questioned whether “public opinion in great democracies would have allowed [the wars to continue], if they had known the full measure and impact of the horrendous loss of life that occurred”. In OIF, embeds broadcast combat missions into homes and, if military commanders were incompetent and had fought a “bloody nonsensical war”, journalists would have presented that incompetence and officer transfers, strategy changes or war termination could have resulted.

5. Since OIF, analysts have postulated how embedded coverage might have unfolded if the coalition had combated a sophisticated, potent adversary that halted the campaign and inflicted massive casualties. During the ground phase, the U. S. Army V Corps Commander, LT-GEN Wallace, said the “enemy we’re fighting is a bit different than the one we war gamed against”. Newsreaders and retired generals ruminated upon this statement when criticizing U. S. strategy, and President Bush reverted to “attack mode” and alternated from a hands-off tactic, to assuming “personal control of the message machine for the war”. Nonetheless, LT-GEN Wallace, “was just voicing the frustration and anxiety that he was feeling at the time” observed the embed who had interviewed him. The ‘fallout’ over a minor remark though raised concerns about what might have eventuated if the coalition

had experienced a debacle. How would embeds report their country's calamitous battle losses over a prolonged period?

6. If journalists do not fully comprehend an event's background and complexity, they may revert to sensationalism to elicit audience understanding. Similarly, embeds who encounter dire military results might resort to swift criticism — “gotcha journalism” and cataclysmic predictions — if they fail to comprehend operations and strategies. This is daunting for the military considering an analysis of U. S. television networks (Fox News, CNN, NBC, CBS, ABC) during three days of OIF.

Embedded reports — 61.2% were live — made the content “richer” but also more difficult to understand, which may lead to snap judgements among viewers. Other research suggests further problems. An analysis of CBS, ABC and NBC night-time programs on defence during the Reagan, Bush and Clinton Administrations revealed almost 32% of that coverage as problematic. The research categorised “problematic coverage as: general lack of balance or context; lack of context as a result of brevity; lack of knowledge on the part of the correspondent; overemphasis on drama or bad news at the expense of substance and context”. This reflects the reporters' insufficient knowledge and simplification of complex issues hindered their analysis and fostered criticism without due reference to the context of those issues. Of course, that research occurred before the embedding program in OIF but it would have included the few embed reports from OAF.

7. This research underscores the potential negative consequences of news coverage. Two elements especially relevant to the military are the media's

propensity for hyperbole and anticipation of perfection. News agencies tend to feature the “ exceptional” and the “ dramatic” and widely report military mistakes; however, successes receive less coverage. Nonetheless, issues that indicate “ bad news” might not be particularly noteworthy in the context of an overall operation.

Whilst the media industry has these tendencies, Western military forces have perpetuated a perception of perfection in their projection of lethal force, especially air power. For instance, in the previous conflict with embeds, NATO briefings for OAF were, “ massive exercises in spin control, carefully tailored facts, and carefully chosen omissions”. In one briefing, MAJ-GEN Wald disingenuously claimed 99. 6% of 20, 000 bombs had hit their target; however, after the conflict, NATO disclosed that it could merely confirm approximately half of about 1, 955 target hits, which totaled almost half the figure of 99. 6%[v].

8. Four years later in OIF, satellite technology and the embed program had appreciably complicated the coalition’s dissemination of information. Instantaneous coverage enabled the media to enter the military’s decision cycle and consequently, there was “ absolutely no way to place spin control” on what embeds were reporting. Embedding fundamentally changed the extent of information distributed to citizens, when up until the most recent conflicts, operational accounts were available only to governments and military authorities. People now receive sufficient details to form their own opinions and adversaries have access to the same analyses and intelligence. Furthermore, the speed of these transmissions has compressed the decision

cycle, which means commanders and politicians have to respond more expeditiously than ever before.

Aside from technology considerations, instigating an embed system becomes more complex in pre-emptive operations with limited lead-time and stringent Op Security. Operation Urgent Fury (OUF) provided little time to plan media coverage and the Pentagon initially denied access to reporters. Considering the work in managing the OIF embed program — seven days per week, 24-hours per day — and lack of an existing program for OUF, the brief timeframe would have made embedding highly difficult to implement for that operation.

In Operation Just Cause (OJC), the military had sufficient time to plan media operations but OpSec requirements restricted media outlets' coordination planning. If the Pentagon had tried to organise a large embed program for OJC, it would not have been feasible without violating Op Security.

Furthermore, such operational necessities reduce media interaction before an operation, which may hinder communication between the media and military and ultimately affect the success of the embed program.

9. The Media Embedding Program in OIF represented the greatest single instance of embedding and demonstrated certain benefits for coalition forces, whilst imposing an additional burden upon battlefield units. This operation though, neither fully tested the robustness of this concept nor resolved whether embedding correspondents in units may be suitable across a broad spectrum of operations.

10. In 2003, Iraq's degraded military capabilities meant its forces were clearly below a level of technological sophistication. Iraq's inferiority against overwhelming coalition firepower thus enabled the Pentagon to successfully utilize the embedding system. Critics of embedding contend however, that a sophisticated adversary could exploit this concept for tactical gains.

Furthermore, embeds may have presented graphic scenes of unit decimation if coalition battle losses and massive fatalities had occurred in OIF. Adverse criticism of coalition performances and penetrating questioning of that operation's relevance would have inevitably dominated international media coverage. This could have exacerbated unit/headquarters workloads (responding to a government's transformed strategies, perhaps influenced by critical media reports) and shattered the morale of commanders and soldiers. Embedding also remains untested in a war of 'national survival'. In this conflict, first-order obligations pertaining to survival may overturn second-order constitutional and legal obligations, probably at a cost of embed positions. Ironically, the absence of embeds in such a war could actually cost lives because embed coverage of operations may expose a military's ineptitude or a government's nonsensical decision to wage war.

11. The relative success of embedding in OIF does not mean this program shall definitely appear in future conflicts and specifically so in the Indian context. India with its present state of technological devp and also the conflict contingencies that can be envisaged is very unlikely that would engage in a war with such asymmetry as in OIF. Instead, an adversary's capabilities and the type of operation (i. e. war of national survival) shall probably govern the initial type of media program. This approach may not

impress media practitioners but defeating an advanced adversary — especially in a war of national survival — may require all the capacities of the military and a whole-of-government approach, without the distraction of attending to embedded journalists demands.