

# Journalism and media in the vietnam war

[War](#), [Vietnam War](#)



Since the beginning of World War II, television gradually became familiar to the American public. By the late 1950s, televisions began to be manufactured in large scale and were soon present in over 90% of American homes by 1963. During the Vietnam War, television had a significant role in the war's coverage along with newspapers and radio broadcasts. The Vietnam War was truly the " first television war". The new medium of television and the lack of government censorship gave the average American unprecedented access to the war. However, the role of media in the Vietnam War has been a subject of continuing controversy. Many historians believe that the media played a large role in the development of the antiwar movement and the U. S. defeat. They claim that the media took advantage of its unrestricted access to portray the Vietnam war in a negative light, which in turn, created American disenchantment with the war effort. Their argument follows that as news reports became more negative, public opinion pressured the government to primarily downsize troop deployment and adjust other aspects to American policy in Vietnam. However, it has been difficult to sufficiently show that reporters tainted the truth with conjecture and opinion. The media solely presented uncensored images and statistics about the war and captured the growing domestic dissent against the war. Rather than taking an active role in challenging political authority, the media facilitated intense sentiments towards the war since news content became much more graphic. A more convincing argument, therefore, is that reporters followed the doctrines of objective journalism, and the media " methodically" reported the Vietnam War. As a result, doves became much more entrenched in their stance against the war. This, along with pressure

from the youth and the antiwar movement, compelled the U. S. to rethink its strategy in Vietnam and brought about U. S. defeat.

Many historians have repeatedly put forward the thesis of an “ oppositional media”. This thesis is centered upon the notion that the American news media transformed from a relatively passive and conservative institution into one that openly opposes political authority. It follows that the news was, in large part, responsible for the decline of public confidence in political institutions as well as a for a weakening of political authority. Additionally, historians have focused more on television news rather than other media outlets since television provides viewers with graphic videos and images, and hence it was a particularly important source of delegitimizing news coverage. <sup>[1]</sup> One of the most empirically backed statements of the oppositional media thesis is that people who relied primarily on television for news tended to be more cynical about political authority than those who used other media more frequently. <sup>[2]</sup> This was shown through data gathered by Michael Robinson in his report, “ Public Affairs Television and the Growth of Political Malaise” (1976). Robinson went on to explain that events on television are constantly conveyed through an “ inferential structure” that often injects a “ negativistic, contentious, or anti-institutional bias.” <sup>[3]</sup>

However, Robinson’s study does not measure the most important variable: the actual content of television news media. The association between attitudes towards political authority and the reliance on television for information is meaningful in some contexts but not when evaluating whether the journalists, reporters, or anchors were openly critical of the news they

were reporting. In another study – Miller, Erbring, and Goldenberg’s “ Type-Set Politics: Impact of Newspapers on Public Confidence” (1979) – the CPC National Election data was utilized to assess the correlation between the content of media and the political attitudes of its viewers. Similar to Robinson’s study, the authors found a substantial association between negatively critical media and a bias against government. <sup>[4]</sup> This was a much stronger test of this link since in the study, news content varied considerably from types of media, but notably people who read the newspaper tended to “ score lower in indices measuring trust in government and, to a lesser degree, political efficacy.” <sup>[5]</sup>

Here again, however, some questions can be raised surrounding the role of the media in the delegitimization of political authority and whether or not these efforts are institutionalized. This dynamic should be “ evaluated at the aggregate level” in order to effectively make a conclusion. <sup>[6]</sup> For instance, Miller, Goldenberg, and Erbring <sup>[7]</sup> could have concluded the opposite way by saying that positive media content had a strong relationship with positive evaluations of government. <sup>[8]</sup> However, more information is needed, such as how much of the content of news is favorable, unfavorable, or neutral towards political authority. Overall, it is very difficult to sufficiently demonstrate that media outlets purposely tainted its content with opinion and conjecture rather than presenting the news objectively.

One time period that is crucial to assess is the Tet Offensive that occurred in 1968. This event was a series of surprise attacks carried out by the Vietcong and North Vietnamese forces on hamlets, towns, and cities in South Vietnam.

[9] Even though it was a military defeat for the North, it was a political defeat for the South and the United States. The American public was shocked to see how the North Vietnamese and Northern-sponsored rebels were still able to amount such an attack late in the war. The scope and scale of this offensive led many Americans to believe that their political leaders were lying to them about progress in Vietnam. As a result, Americans who viewed American intervention in Vietnam as “not a mistake” would never again constitute a majority in the polls. [10] The Tet Offensive is regarded to be a big turning point in the war and has been repeatedly emphasized by historians who support the Oppositional Media Thesis for primarily bringing about public disenchantment with the American war effort. However, this idea is flawed. Commentaries on television, for instance, did reflect some sense of favorability or unfavorability towards the war effort that did in fact spike during the Tet period but returned back to levels in the pre-Tet period. 5.9 percent of commentaries contained explicit comments by journalists in the pre-Tet period. This percentage shot up to 20 percent during the Tet Offensive, then settled back to 9.8 percent in the post-Tet period. [11] Overall, there was not an incredible shift in balance of news coverage that included some hint of a personal attitude toward the war effort, and most coverages continued to fit the traditional “who, what, when, where model of journalism.” [12]

Nevertheless, the American public was shocked to see graphic portrayals of the

Vietnam War on television. The traditional view holds true: Americans watched the uncensored news in horror, but there is still a limit to how big of a role that the media played in this dynamic. However, television coverage did indeed decrease support for the Vietnam War over the long-term. Television showed the true costs of the war to the American public, who increasingly concluded that the war was not worth the price that they were paying. <sup>[13]</sup> This price was American casualties. There were also other developments that shifted American opinion, which were arguably facilitated by media coverage. This mainly includes the Buddhist Crisis, Tet Offensive (of course), My Lai Massacre, and Nixon's Cambodian Incursion. For each of these developments, media coverage differed depending on the time period. For instance, there was not a lot of attention on the Buddhist Crisis because it was apparent in the beginning of the war. Buddhists actually reached out to journalists and photographers to help spread the word about their plight. <sup>[14]</sup> One iconic image that arose includes the one taken by Malcolm Browne, which captures a Buddhist monk burning in the middle of a street. This photograph did not ever make the first page in a newspaper. <sup>[15]</sup> This was because in light of objective journalism, newspapers usually headlined official sources then included subsequent news from individual journalists. <sup>[16]</sup> However, this was long before Americans started to heavily criticize the Vietnam War, but it did bring forward that the Diem regime was not supported by its own people.

Another point to consider is again, the Tet Offensive. As previously noted, the percent of news that contained personal commentaries peaked during

the Tet Offensive up to 20 percent, but lowered to 9.8 percent in its aftermath, which was a little higher than before the attacks. <sup>[17]</sup> As the data suggests, the personal commentaries of journalists did not influence the opinion of the American public in the long run. The Tet Offensive was also a turning point because it represented the ambiguity of the information that the government was presenting. Reports that appeared in different newspapers and television segments offered different data, which created confusion among Americans as to what the truth really was. <sup>[18]</sup> Through this, the media continued to be objective by only reporting information given by official sources. For instance, one of Baldwin's sources claimed that, "The enemy hopes to foster war-weariness; to strengthen the opposition to the war in the United States and in South Vietnam, and to force negotiations at a disadvantage." <sup>[19]</sup> Another source stated:

The overall strategy of the enemy, as interpreted by the Pentagon, is aimed primarily at political and psychological objectives. The terrorists' attacks in Saigon and elsewhere were intended as 'headline grabbers' as one officer put it, 'to make us look silly' and to impress the United States and South Vietnamese public opinion with the enemy's strength. <sup>[20]</sup>

Nonetheless, the Tet Offensive was given a large coverage in the media. CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite reported, "the U. S. is mired in stalemate." <sup>[21]</sup> This was a devastating statement; there is no one Americans trust today like they trusted Walter Cronkite, "the most trusted man in television," in 1968. Before Tet, Cronkite supported the war, saying, "the courageous decision that communism's advance must be stopped in Asia and guerilla warfare as

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a means to a political end must be finally discouraged.” [22] However, shortly after Tet Walter Cronkite openly questioned U. S. foreign policy, along with the many Americans that watch his CBS news segments.

Overall, the Tet Offensive was the end of the perception that the U. S. could achieve success in the Vietnam War. Reporters started to question their official sources and look more closely to find the most truthful news to report to the public. [23] This was done in an objective manner, with little evidence that the media purposely broadcasted news in a negative light. The evidence surrounding the Tet Offensive supports the mirror theory, which suggests that the American public forced a change in America’s foreign policy in light of the news they received from the media. [24]

Another shift in American public opinion came in light of the My Lai Massacre. At first, My Lai was not a big story and was only mentioned as a “victory for the U. S. with over one hundred enemy dead.” [25] There were no photographs for this event because newspapers chose not to publish any material. However, Americans got to know the truth when GI Ronald Ridenhour started his own investigation of the massacre and Representative Morris Udall pressed for an official investigation. Newspapers and TV news reports demonstrated what truly happened during the My Lai massacre, and photos of huts burning and dead body piles were published in Life magazine. This news reinforced the idea that American soldiers themselves were disillusioned with the war effort and that their morale was low. This in turn led many to believe that it was past time for the U. S. to leave Vietnam.



President Richard Nixon's Cambodian Incursion was also a large jump, ensuring major protests including the Kent State shootings. The Ohio National Guard fired live rounds into a crowd of unarmed, but unruly protesters. When Nixon was elected, there was not a lot of domestic dissent because the public typically supported his policies that included Vietnamization. However, along with the withdrawal of American troops, Nixon also wanted to bring the North Vietnamese to the negotiation table by bombing its support lines in Cambodia. This offensive move took a toll on Nixon's support ratings. [26] But more importantly, many student groups became prominent. The SDS, along with the New Left, included much support from younger populations that heavily criticized U. S. involvement in Vietnam. [27] They wanted a swift end to the war by immediately leaving Vietnam. [28] After seeing Nixon's recent action, protests erupted in many universities that were often headed by subgroups of the New Left and the SDS. The media effectively captured their sentiment, which created a growing disillusion with the American war effort. [29]

Opposing the oppositional media thesis is the mirror theory, which suggests that the media reported the news objectively and that the public disenchantment with the war is what mainly pressured the U. S. government to change its policy in Vietnam. Mirror theorists claim that reporters unconditionally followed the doctrine of objective journalism, whose fundamental characteristics include objectivity, independence, and balance. One main argument of the mirror theory that is compelling is that the media took on an anti- establishment slant only when the elites started to question

American strategy in Vietnam. <sup>[30]</sup> As elite consensus eroded, public opposition moved into the mainstream. Subsequently, domestic dissent became newsworthy, especially from political demonstrations originating from the New Left. The media reflected this schism while still reporting the Vietnam War methodically.

The American journalist who wants to report objectively, impervious to political pressure, would want to present news from an unbiased perspective, and therefore relies primarily on official sources for information. The most prominent characteristic of newsgathering procedures during the Vietnam War was the intimate connection between media and political authority. Journalists typically organized in a system in which information is disclosed to them from government officials. Generally, in practice, the function of objective journalism was to transmit to the public the government's perspective of the war. This was consistent throughout the war up to the Tet Offensive. The media typically broadcast good news about the war and the progress of the war effort.

However, a new issue arose alongside the Vietnam story: the story of domestic dissent. Even though newsgathering procedures did not change to a great extent between 1963 and 1973, a significant development that turned the tide of the war was the rise of public disenchantment, and television effectively captured its story. On one hand, official information was still being broadcast along with the appearance of official spokespeople, but on the other hand, opponents of the war became increasingly visible in the news. <sup>[31]</sup> Dissenters appeared in stories focused on the issue of domestic

dissent – the prospects for legislative opposition, the tactics of the demonstrations, how many people were attending them, whether violence would occur, how order would be restored, etc.

If the media had become an oppositional institution during the latter years of the Vietnam war, it would have given favorable coverage to opponents of administrative policy, but this was not the case. The media did give increasing coverage to opponents of the war and general domestic dissent; however, this coverage was not particularly favorable. The ratio of journalists' comments was roughly two to one before the Tet Offensive and after. <sup>[32]</sup> That is, approximately two unfavorable comments to one favorable comment. The oppositional thesis fails here – the argument that journalists became more skeptical of administrative policy did not translate into a sympathetic coverage of the opposition to the war.

Overall, there was a persistence of journalistic respect for official sources. It is an important symbolic recognition of the legitimacy of turning to officials for authoritative information and also the legitimacy of modern political institutions. In light of this, the norms of objective journalism required journalists to pass on official information without commenting on its accuracy or relevance. These restraints were arguably followed upon, with only 8 percent of stories sampled containing explicit commentary by journalists. <sup>[33]</sup> Furthermore, it can be estimated that a faithful viewer who watched the news every night would have seen an average of about one reference to inaccuracy of official statements a month. <sup>[34]</sup> This suggests that journalists were not going out of their way to question official information or

to air questions raised by opponents. There was a clear distinction between broadcasting official information and capturing public disenchantment with the war effort.

All in all, the case of Vietnam does not support the thesis that American media changed to an oppositional role during the 1960s. There was a substantial turn toward more critical coverage of American policy in Vietnam, but it is very hard to argue that journalists actively began to oppose political authority. The ideology of objective journalism and the institutional connection between the government and media both persisted throughout the Vietnam War. Moreover, the mirror theory effectively characterizes American journalism during this time period – rather than openly challenging political authority, the media reflected the prevailing pattern of political debate. That is, reflected the collapse of public consensus on U. S. policy in Vietnam. As opposition to the war expanded, normal procedures of journalism produced increasing coverage of oppositional viewpoints. This was less favorable to administration policymakers, but it does not suggest that the media shifted to an oppositional role. The media simply started to treat foreign policy as a political issue to a much greater extent; subjects and viewpoints of the opposition that were relatively infrequent in the early years of the Vietnam war came to be treated as legitimate news stories. Therefore, the media methodically reported information and facilitated intense sentiments to the American public.

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