

# Media and the vietnam and iraq wars

[Countries](#), [Vietnam](#)



Despite the differences in American culture from the time of the Vietnam war to the Iraq war, similarities exist in the way Americans perceived both wars. Vietnam and Iraq both raised questions about the appropriateness of U. S. involvement in foreign affairs and, in some cases, resulted in negative perceptions of the U. S. military. As the link between those fighting the war and those at home watching and reading about the events of the war, the media played an important role in both cases.

#### Relationship between the media and the military

During the beginning of Vietnam there was no official policy of censorship. Censorship would have been difficult to manage because as a guest of South Vietnam, the U. S. would have had to allow the South Vietnamese to control the censorship. Additionally, according to Daniel Hallin, the U. S. administration wanted to deny that there was a war happening there, and to impose censorship is one of the signs that a country is really going to war. <sup>1</sup>

By 1963, reporters in Vietnam had begun receiving increasingly contradictory information about the war. Military officials in Saigon maintained that the war was going well, while personnel in the field told a different story. One glaring example was the defeat of the South Vietnamese at Ap Bac. Eight days after the incident, military officials declared the operation a success. Reporter Mal Browne recalls that when the astonished press challenged this statement, they were told by the Commander in Chief of U. S. forces to “ get on the team.” <sup>1</sup> This was the beginning of a more strained relationship between the media and the military.

It was in 1963 also that news programs were extended to a half hour and began showing footage of the war. This was the first time American viewers were able to experience the war right in their living rooms. In 1965, Morley Safer brought the Cam Ne report to viewers. The Cam Ne incident marked the first time the average American was exposed to images of their soldiers engaged in activities that were less than noble - burning huts in a small village as women and children ran away screaming. Though not officially tied to the report, shortly after it aired the government issued new rules of engagement designed to protect South Vietnamese civilians.

By the time the U. S. engaged in war with Iraq, the world had become a different place. The military had learned the value of public perception and the need to manage it. Restrictions were placed on the press limiting where they were allowed to go and what they were allowed to report. Unfortunately for the administration, what they couldn't manage was the amount of amateur footage that made its way into the public eye.

Digital cameras and the internet made it possible for anyone to post photos and other footage in front of a broad audience. Some of the most sensational stories reported during the war - including the Abu Ghraib incident - were the result of amateur photography that found its way into professional media outlets. While of questionable value as a news source, this footage showing graphic scenes intrigued viewers and affected their perception of the U. S. military and their mission in Iraq.

Another effect of technology was that reporters were able to feed information to networks "real time." This to-the-second coverage allowed viewers to experience the war as it happened, but the information they received was

not always accurate. When the military unit in which a reporter was embedded came under attack, the reporter could only report what he was experiencing without the benefit of objectivity or the “big picture” view. While they did provide some provocative footage, these reports did not increase understanding of the situation. Morley Safer stated this eloquently when he said, “Live coverage...only adds heat, it does not add light.”<sup>1</sup>

### Accuracy of reporting

Norman Solomon, syndicated columnist on media and politics, suggests that the media has been fundamental in making war possible for the U. S. through fraudulent reporting. He cites reporting of the Gulf of Tonkin in Vietnam and of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq as examples.<sup>2</sup>

Tim Ryan, Army Lieutenant Colonel, has also expressed concern about the accuracy of reporting and its effect on public perception during the Iraq war. He has suggested that the media intentionally focused on negatives or failures during the war and ignored positives for the sake of a more sensational report. He stated that “even the Arab media was more willing to show positives,” such as school renovations or the creation of a youth center, than were American journalists.<sup>3</sup>

During both wars, questions have been raised about the absence of reporting on U. S. interests in the countries in which they were fighting. In Vietnam, manganese, rubber and minerals were of economic interest to the U. S. In Iraq, of course, it was oil. The possibility that the U. S. had less than noble reasons for entering into these wars was rarely addressed in mainstream media.

## Media influence

There are differing opinions on whether the media actually influenced the Vietnam or Iraq wars or whether they simply provided documentation of what was happening. As the above examples show, some commentators believe that the media did affect events by making it easier for the government to wage war through fraudulent reporting, or by negatively affecting the morale of American soldiers and citizens.

Contrarily, the organization Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) claims that the media has been falsely accused of affecting the war. <sup>4</sup> According to FAIR, reporters merely reflect the opinions and concerns of the public. As reporter Chris Hedges stated “ when everyone's waving a flag, the media waves a flag. When middle class families start wondering why their boy is coming home in a rubber bag, then the media starts asking questions too.” <sup>1</sup>

Regardless of whether they merely presented or actually influenced the Vietnam and Iraq wars, it's clear that the media encountered similar challenges during both wars. Despite all the changes that occurred in the 40-plus years between the two wars and the fact that confidence in mainstream media waned in that time, the public still looked to the media to help them understand the facts and to represent their interests when they were concerned about the actions being taken.

## Works Cited

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