

Media impact on war



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- Vivienne Owusu-Ansah

MEDIA TRANSFORMATION

Can media help win – or lose – a war? Answer through detailed discussion of coverage in one war since 1945 – The Gulf War II.

In 2003, America and its allies, U. K., Australia and Poland, well known as the coalition forces invaded Iraq and began a conflict which has come to be known as the Gulf war II or Iraq war and were later joined by several other countries. During the Iraq war, the Allied forces permitted the media to travel with them in their tanks and jets to war fields to cover the war so as to get first hand news to the public. Though the media has been involved in covering previous conflicts, the Iraq war was said to be the war which allowed the media to have extensive coverage and brought first hand news to the public. This allowed the Allied forces to control and manage the information that went out in public “ Frankly, our job is to win the war. Part of that is information warfare. So we are going to attempt to dominate the information environment. Embedding journalists honorably served that end, said Long[1]” (Kahn, 2004).

Some journalists argue that the army used the journalists as a propaganda tool. This can be deemed as true because journalists’ reports were always favourable to the coalition forces. Reporting alongside the soldiers in war made the journalists feel a sense of closeness to troops. Moreover, the soldiers were the very people who were protecting the journalists’ whiles at the war front thus it became difficult if not impossible to report any negative issues about them.

Another point to consider is that, because the media was reporting from the war front alongside the troops, they were able to send real time reports indirectly to Saddam Hussein's government about the heavy artillery being used by the Allied forces. This psychologically weakened Iraq as they realised they could not match the ammunition strength of the coalition forces. Pictures of the military tanks rolling into Iraq were also another factor that helped propagate the Allied forces' aim. This showed the might of the forces which intimidated the Iraqi forces as well as the Iraqi public. A comment purported to have been made by Chris Hughes, the spokesperson of the U. S. Marines a day before the war highlights this, "The first image of this war will define the conflict" (Buncombe 2003 cited in Parry 2010). If the public had initially supported the Iraqi government the pictures of the Allied forces were enough to sway public support to the powerful side in this case the Allied forces.

According to Professor Barbie Zelizer of University of Southern California's Annenberg school of communication, a picture showing a crowd of Iraqis pulling down Saddam Hussein's statue was quite influential, this is because it told a story to the public that the government of Saddam Hussein was no longer in power and that the public supported the Allied forces and this was an effective means to winning or losing the war. It showed the crowd as being nationalists thereby triggering the general public to act as nationalists too.

During the Iraq war, the army is believed to have had around 600 journalists from various news organisations entrenched with the troops thus there was an overflow of news and all were in favour of the Allied forces. This therefore

created a high level of fear amongst the enemies having to always read and listen to the might of the forces on TV, radio and in newspapers.

Some journalists argue that the Allied forces had won the war even before any ammunitions were fired and this is because the public had already been scared into fleeing due to the fact that they were made to believe they could be killed by nuclear or chemical weapons, which in effect made it less difficult for the Allied forces to win the war. In the case of the Iraq war, the Allied forces controlled their agenda, creating awareness and used the media to portray a one sided view. Most of the pictures that were circulated were of those showing the might of the forces and in some cases a few Iraqi nationals showing their support to the Allied forces and kept any image of casualties suffered by the Allied forces out of the public eye especially in their respective countries because they wanted the public to continue supporting the war till the end. This adds momentum to the political idea of using photography during war to manipulate the public.

Journalism is arguably a powerful tool often used in affecting and changing public opinion on issues. Media institutions usually broadcast what attracts their target audience. Prior to invading Iraq, George Bush - the American President, in a national broadcast which was telecast in Iraq, heard him appealing to the ordinary citizens of Iraq to support America and the coalition forces for their own good and also portrayed the Iraqi president, Saddam Hussein, as an enemy and the cause of all the problems of the Iraqis. He further suggested that the solution to their problem is war to overthrow what the western governments termed as undemocratic regime of Saddam Hussein and urged them to fight for their freedom. His speech was

rhetoric and played very well on the public's emotion as they did not support the Iraq government to fight when they were called to join. Bush used his message to amass public opinion in acknowledging America and its Allied's military presence in Iraq.

According to Samir Khader of Al Jazeera (the most prominent media institution during the invasion), the aim of their station during the war was to educate the world most especially the Arab viewers and to prove to them that in every war there are always civilian casualties. This did not seem to work well initially as their network was not far reached, they were also deemed not to be reliable and as such was a mere propaganda tool used by the Iraqi government and enemy groups who attacked America on September 11. The public in America, United Kingdom and other parts of the world had been persuaded into believing these perceptions by the media though there was no proof. The Arab media did not do much to help its credibility by not reporting human rights abuses against sectarian and ethnic minorities and opposition Iraqi citizens which were perpetuated on a large scale by Saddam Hussein's government. Although Al Jazeera's message about war casualties is true, it is worth mentioning that, this is not something new as that is some of the realities of war. There has never been any war fought without any civilian or military casualty and Jack Straw, Britain's Foreign Secretary during the period of the Iraq war rightly described war in an article in Mail Online as an occurrence that is filled with horror.

As pictures and news of war casualties (both civilians and American soldiers) got to the American public their views began to change. The public became angry and began demonstrating against the mission of the government in

going to war in Iraq and demanded that troops are withdrawn. This message reflected during some of American president's foreign visits. In the U. K., President Bush was met by anti war demonstrations in London because of the Iraq war and other cities where he visited also met him with similar demonstrations.

During the Iraq war some western media used spin to get specific messages to the international world. An example is a picture showing a crowd chanting and singing which the western media portrayed as Iraqis celebrating Bush but they were rather protesting America's involvement in the war with chants in Arabic that the troops should be withdrawn from Iraq. A journalist who was reporting for BBC interpreted the story to portray the crowd as singing praises to Bush for getting rid of Saddam Hussein and celebrating their freedom. This helped sway public opinion about the war in the western world.

Before the coalition forces marched into any city in Iraq, they used the media to report extensively on how the cities had already been conquered and this plan built fear in the opposing army who showed little resistance, all these stories were however later found to be false but that was after it had served its intended purpose.

Most of the coverage by the western media such as CNN and NSBC was deemed as biased to favour the allied forces. This is partly because only a few of the journalists embedded with the troops did get to experience action at the front line. Most of them were stationed at the command centre where information was always received from the military and this played an

important role in helping them win the support of the public. The Arab media on the other hand did same, they also used propaganda in getting the Arab world to see the Allied forces as the worst enemy who had no right to be in Iraq with no intention of protecting civilians and alleging the coalition forces rather had their personal interest of getting control of the oil in Iraq. They propagated Arab nationalism to the public.

The Allied forces knew the important role played by independent media during war. The public usually believe stories reported by independent journalists at war front as being unbiased. This is not wholly true as they always report from an angle that suits their organisation. The coalition forces used the media to their advantage rather than having the military releasing information to the press which would be seen as biased towards the aim of their mission in Iraq by the general public and not being credible as well.

Local media in America had journalists attached to the troops, and most of these media are situated near military bases. The local people who are the main readers in these areas, connected with the media in the neighbourhood during the war through the news items they published, some were messages from the soldiers to their families. The public regarded the news from these newspapers as credible thereby getting them to support the mission of the Allied forces.

Studies have shown how media coverage affected public opinion during the war and led to the public supporting the military mainly due to the reason that the public were not made aware of any other options other than going to war to liberate the people of Iraq and the enemy of the coalition forces

(the government of Saddam Hussein) coming from the back drop of the September 11, 2001 attacks in America which had attracted massive media coverage thereby the public especially the American public viewed military action in Iraq as the only way. This point is echoed by Berinsky, 2008, “ However, as threats recede, citizens begin to resist encroachments on their basic values. Thus, while the particular circumstances of war may be unique, they influence civil liberties judgements through mechanisms that are familiar from studies of domestic politics” (pg. 13). Britain and the other countries that formed the coalition also viewed Iraq as a danger to global peace. Iraq had been portrayed by the coalition forces as a country that had allegedly supported and accommodated the group that attacked America. Another factor worth highlighting is that war casualties were not permitted to be made public by the media and this was strictly enforced by the military at the command centre, any journalist that violated this rule was expelled from the base.

In the weeks prior to the invasion of Iraq, the American government saturated the media, especially prime time news programs of major media stations and newspapers in America such as; CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, CBS and New York Times alleging that Iraq was planning to commit atrocities even greater than the September 11 attacks. The American public believed and therefore backed the government’s decision to go to war in Iraq. This situation was no different in U. K. where BBC, Sky and ITN were also used by the then government of Tony Blair to get the public to support the mission. The media which has a duty to present the public with the truth also failed to question these facts presented by the American and British governments but

rather circulated the government's information to the public as being the truth.

The media effectively helped the coalition forces by influencing public support and also urged the military to go on to win the war in Iraq. Although certain reports disagree with the fact that the coalition forces had won the war because there were and are still sporadic incidents of fighting taking place in Iraq and also that the coalition forces are yet to completely pull out of the region, it is important to stress that although the war was fought in Iraq, the real war was the one perpetuated by the media through the stories they published which psychologically influenced the public at large and this can be seen as pure propaganda. Without that the coalition forces would not have managed to storm Iraq and win the war within a very short period. According to Jack Straw (Hinsliff 2003 cited in Parry 2010), " Twenty-four-hour news actually changes the reality of warfare. The media is changing the reality of warfare, it is not just reporting on it". Given the amount of coverage the western media managed to achieve in the world at large during the Iraq war, if the media in the Arab world had been able to achieve that on the same scale in the Middle East and other parts of the world, the public may not have supported the war the way they did. This would have led to the morale of the troops being at its lowest and their confidence would also have been down and more importantly America would not have got the support they had from the Allied.

[1]Lt. Col. Rick Long was with the U. S. Marine Corps