# Media under fire: Fact and fiction in conditions of war

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## Abstract

*The article reviews recent findings on the quality of war reporting, the conditions under which it takes place, the information policies of the warring parties and their effects. Focusing on German media coverage of the 1991 Gulf war, the Kosovo war and the 2003 Iraq war, it discusses both typical shortcomings of reporting and recent improvements, highlights information control strategies and proposes standards for war reporting.*

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In response to criticism of media coverage of the 1991 Gulf war, the editor-in-chief of a major regional newspaper in Germany replied laconically: "We didn't do very much worse than usual."[1] This statement ranges from resignation to complacency, and says a lot about the gap between the idea and the reality of war coverage. Some journalists — such as the said editor-in-chief — regard aspiring to the truth as a losing battle anyway. The public take a different view.

## Credibility crisis of war coverage

To the mind of many observers, the 1991 Gulf war coverage in Germany plunged the media into a severe credibility crisis because of numerous cases of misinformation and an uncritical handling of information sources.[2] The equally uncritical reporting on the war in Kosovo deepened that crisis and showed the lack of learning aptitude in the media.[3] Media in other countries had also come in for severe criticism of their war coverage even before the 2003 Iraq war,[4] but German observers were particularly fast and outspoken in their adverse

comments on the media performance. Germany thus provides a good example of how the problem is perceived.

Several studies on German coverage of the Kosovo war[5] accused the media of having published statements and partly systematic misinformation by political players and military forces without careful prior examination. Criticism also focused on neglect of the controversial issue of the war's legitimacy. My own content analysis of editorials in German quality newspapers confirmed the absence of a debate on the legitimacy and political appropriateness of the military mission.[6] The opinions voiced did not vary widely and thus mirrored the broad parliamentary consensus in approving the war. Alternative perceptions questioning the assumed unavoidability of the mission were hardly expressed. In their discourse the media concentrated on the strategic aspects of war, and failed to raise questions of legitimacy and the negative consequences of the military intervention.

## Lessons learned in the 2003 Iraq war and their limitations

After yet another Gulf war — the region was also the scene of the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war — German war coverage has changed. Although establishment of the truth remains a constant challenge, this dilemma is now likely to be made known along with the reporting. Addressing working conditions, censorship and potential interests behind some information endows war coverage with renewed credibility, while calling information into question has become a major part of that coverage.[7]

During a panel discussion with senior representatives of the German quality media that took place in the first few days of the Iraq war, the participants proved to be highly pleased with their own performance. They were all convinced of having dealt critically with information in an extraordinary manner, and

1    Siegfried Weischenberg, "Zwischen Zensur und Verantwortung: Wie Journalisten (Kriege) konstruieren," in Martin Löffelholz (ed.), *Krieg als Medienereignis: Grundlagen und Perspektiven der Krisenkommunikation*, Westdeutscher Verlag: Opladen, 1993, pp. 65–80, at p. 78 (quoting the editor-in-chief of the *Stuttgarter Zeitung*).

2    Udo Michael Krüger, "Der Irak-Krieg im deutschen Fernsehen: Berichterstattung in ARD/Das Erste, ZDF, RTL und SAT. 1," *Media Perspektiven*, 9/2003, pp. 398-413, at p. 398; Weischenberg, *op. cit*. (note 1), p. 79.

3    Ulrich Albrecht/Jörg Becker (eds.), *Medien zwischen Krieg und Frieden*, Nomos, Baden-Baden, 2002 (primarily pp. 64–122); Martin Löffelholz, "Neue Schlachtfelder — alter Journalismus? Bedingungen und Konsequenzen der Kriegskommunikation im Zeitalter globaler Public Relations", pp. 27–36, p. 32 and Hermann Meyn, "Aus Fehlern gelernt? Kriegsberichterstattung als Herausforderung des Journalismus und seiner Ethik," pp. 105–113, at p. 110, both in Deutsche Welle (ed.): "*Sagt die Wahrheit: Die bringen uns um!" Zur Rolle der Medien in Krisen und Kriegen*, Vistas, Cologne, 2001.

4    See the Special Issue of the *European Journal of Communication*, (3) 2000.

5    See e.g. Ulrich Albrecht/Jörg Becker, *op. cit*. (note 3).

6    Christiane Eilders/Albrecht Lüter, "Germany at war: Competing framing strategies in German public discourse," *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 15 (3) 2000, pp. 415–428; Christiane Eilders/ Albrecht Lüter, "Gab es eine Gegenöffentlichkeit während des Kosovo-Krieges? Eine vergleichende Analyse der Deutungsrahmen im deutschen Mediendiskurs," in Ulrich Albrecht/ Jörg Becker, *op. cit*. (note 3), pp. 103–122.

7    Udo Michael Krüger, *op. cit*. (note 2), p. 412.

of having adequately warned the public that no firm findings were available. Complacency prevailed all over the place. The sigh of relief could almost be heard, insofar as this time the coverage had withstood closer scrutiny. Thus the extensive failure of coverage both of the 1991 Gulf war and in particular of the war in Kosovo had been made good. The media had apparently learned to expound the problems of information and its sources at length. In the event of doubt they offered two versions of the truth, not without mentioning the interests behind it.

In their self-conscious attempt to do better in covering the Iraq war, the media also focused on themselves. In addition to (and partly instead of) their reports on actual warfare, the media reported on their working conditions, their scepticism about certain information sources and the difficulty of getting correct information.[8] So among other things we have to deal with media introspection on an unprecedented scale during the Iraq war. Indeed, a survey on TV coverage reveals that eleven per cent of the reports do not deal with the actual warfare or its collateral damages, but are centred on the role of the media and propaganda.[9]

Moreover, the same survey underscored a number of favourable developments in the quality of war coverage. After all, when speaking about the learning aptitude of the media the quality of coverage is the decisive factor. Thus a multitude of information sources, including both the warring parties and the bordering States, were used in the coverage of the Iraq war. In contrast, during the 1991 Gulf war CNN was the predominant source. This shows that the media suspected some sources to be mouthpieces of propaganda and were anxious in each case to neutralize this biased information. Almost every tenth report addressed the credibility of the source. Considering that a great deal of the coverage contains statements about speculation and uncertainties, it is clear that a fundamental change has taken place. For instance, eighty per cent of the comments by anchorwoman Anne Will were assumptions and speculation about underlying factors.[10] Contrary to popular ideas, that is by no means an indication of poor journalism. This outspoken scepticism about information sources signifies above all a new quality of war journalism.

Another difference needs to be pointed out when comparing German coverage of the war in Kosovo and the Iraq war. Whereas the media had basically supported the Kosovo war, they turned out to be very critical of the Iraq war, and in the German media system its legitimacy was widely doubted. The media even lapsed into a moralizing tone. Their special attention was centred on victims among the civil population. The proportion of dead civilians announced by the German TV channel ARD was approximately twice as high as that announced by the American programme ABC.[11] Advocates of war blamed the ARD for being naively blind to the repression within the Iraqi regime.

8   Andrea Szukala, "Medien und öffentliche Meinung im Irakkrieg," *Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, B24-25/2003, pp. 25–34, p. 25.
9   Michael Krüger, *op. cit*. (note 2), p. 412.
10  Andrea Szukala, *op. cit*. (note 8), p. 25.
11  *Ibid*., p. 29.

This new critical attitude of the German media cannot, however, be attributed to a sudden spread of pacifism in Germany. Instead it reflects a mechanism referred to as the "indexing theory."[12] This theory postulates that the autonomy of the media is restricted, and that media coverage of wars matches the distribution of opinions in parliament. If a parliament is unanimously in support of a war — as was the case of the war in Kosovo — the media will also support it. Critical voices will not be raised if there is a consensus, and typical cleavages between left and right wing media disappear. If conversely, a parliament at least partly votes against a war — as in the case of the Iraq war — the media will also express critical views.[13] Thus parliamentary consensus is reflected in media opinion, and the media system consequently lacks its most important basis for acting as monitor and critic.

## Strategies of information control

Although the media might lack autonomy and tend to follow parliamentary consensus, warring parties cannot rely on an automatically supportive media attitude. It goes without saying that they constantly develop new information control strategies to ensure that the media do not counteract their views. For warring parties the public perception of the objectives of war and the actual warfare, i.e. public opinion on the war itself, is an existential resource of modern warfare. Nowadays wars cannot be waged without public support. The less the United States relied on the compliance of its allies during the Iraq intervention, the more it endeavoured to convince its own public of the need for that war.[14] In doing so, media coverage plays a decisive role. Not only is public opinion expressed in the media, it is also produced and regulated through the media. By keeping media coverage under control, it is possible to sway the general public towards affirmation or rejection of the war.

The US withdrawal from Vietnam had been attributed to far too lax media coverage by military circles. The images of civilian victims, of the inhumanity of warfare and of US casualties had been blamed for the fact that the American public deprived the government of their backing for the war. This reasoning cannot be verified scientifically,[15] but it led to a very creative handling of new forms of censorship by the military.[16]

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12   W. Lance Bennett, "Toward a theory of press-state relations in the United States," *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 40 (2) 1990, pp. 103–125.

13   Christiane Eilders/Albrecht Lüter, "Germany at war," *op. cit.* (note 6); Adrian Pohr, "Indexing im Einsatz: Eine Inhaltsanalyse der Kommentare überregionaler Tageszeitungen in Deutschland zum Afghanistankrieg 2001," *Themenheft Medien & Kommunikationswissenschat*, 2005/2-3, pp. 261-276.

14   Andrea Szukala, *op. cit.* (note 8).

15   Daniel C. Hallin, "The media, the war in Vietnam, and political support: A critique of the thesis of an oppositional media," in Daniel Hallin, *We Keep America on Top of the World: Television Journalism and the Public Sphere*, Routledge, London, New York, 1994, pp. 40–57.

16   Gunther Schrader, "Zensur und Desinformation in Kriegen," in Ulrich Albrecht/Jörg Becker (eds.), *op. cit.* (note 3), pp. 45–54.

Just recently, a major shift could be observed in the US strategy for war-time communication.[17] Military-based "information operations" have replaced the better known foreign policy measures of "public diplomacy." The US army has started to consider information as a discrete military feature, now that various military conflicts have shown that military superiority can no longer be converted outright into political superiority. The so-called information doctrine of 1998 finally made information a foremost priority of all military actions. Under the generic term "information operations" military and media instruments were merged.

The high-tech concept of electronic warfare now also includes information security, public relations and perception control as well as instruments of public diplomacy. The idea is to modify perceptions among elites, soldiers and civilians and get them to understand that war is fought in people's minds rather than on the battleground. Information is now supposed to preserve other military resources.

The resulting military management of information is concerned either with domestic or foreign stakeholders in politics or society or with the warring parties involved. The most important objectives are legitimation, deterrence and camouflage. To achieve these objectives various approaches are adopted: besides securing one's own chain of information and commands, the regulation and selection of flows of information are reckoned to be decisive for military superiority during war and in times of peace. Disruption of the opposing side's information processes through information overload is considered just as essential as systematic deception and force multiplication through communication. Mass media are utilized for all these strategies: embedded journalists, the planning and implementation of media campaigns on military issues and the building of military TV stations are only a few examples of such use.

The new strategies have proved successful, at least in the short run. During the 2003 Iraq war, for example, the US army took only one tenth of the number of prisoners it took in the 1991 Gulf war — as this time many Iraqi soldiers refrained from joining in the hostilities. Szukala also shows, however, that the successful regulation of intensified and systematized media relations gives rise, at least in the long run, to the problem of a "growing credibility gap."[18]

## The strategy of embedded journalism

The method of "embedding" journalists in the allies' military units is one of the US government's new strategies to control information. This strategy had already attracted considerable attention in advance. It replaced the "pool system," adopted

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17  Andrea Szukala, "Informationsoperationen und die Fusion militärischer und medialer Instrumente in den USA: Der Versuch einer militärischen Antwort auf die neuen Bedrohungen," *Themenheft Medien & Kommunikationswissenschaft*, 2005/2-3, pp. 222-240.

18  *Ibid*.

since the Vietnam war but mainly during the 1991 Gulf war, in which journalists had been grouped and headed by the military, media coverage was censored and no access was given to the actual fighting. In accordance with the embedding strategy, on the other hand, journalists are right on the spot with the troops and can report in a relatively unrestricted manner.[19]

This new form of journalism only became possible thanks to the new digital transfer mode systems which allow real-time broadcasting of war reports. The military's calculated intention was to enhance the reporters' credibility by enabling them to be at the scene of hostilities themselves, and simultaneously to reinforce the deterrence of modern American arms and the impression of the army's invulnerability. Images taken by the embedded journalists were rife with weapons. The very presence of civilian journalists testified to the army's invulnerability. To be among the ranks was thus a safe place.

The embedding strategy has generated a great deal of criticism, especially among journalists themselves. It can be demonstrated, however, that the critical stance depends either on actual involvement in the hostilities or on the degree of support for the US forces in the Gulf war.[20] A study of German and US print media coverage shows that the German media's assessment of the strategy of embedded journalism was more critical, and that the closer a particular media outlet is to the left wing of the political spectrum, the more critical the presentation of embedding becomes. This reveals the strong national and political bias of war coverage, even when not reporting on the events but only addressing the role of the media in that coverage.

Meanwhile the US military are no longer all that satisfied with the new strategy. All too often the public heard about supply bottlenecks and hyped-up divisions. Initially US journalists were absolutely in favour of embedding, glad that the restricted information policy of the Afghanistan war had ended. Later on, doubts were expressed as to possible effects of solidarity and thus impacts on coverage, as well as a belittlement of war through this kind of "militainment."

## Information through Arab satellite TV stations

The increased attention to recent US information operations is paralleled by close observation of the Arab satellite TV station al-Jazeera. Its far-reaching presence during the Iraq war also raised scientific interest in general conditions of media production in the Arab world.

The emergence of internationally influential and somewhat politically independent satellite television channels in the Arab world has led to a structural change in the global trade with screen news, which had previously been

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19  Andrea Szukula, *op. cit.* (note 8).

20  Wolgang Donsbach/Olaf Jandura/Diana Müller, "Kriegsberichterstatter oder willfährige Propagandisten? Wie deutsche und amerikanische Printmedien die "Embedded Journalists" im Irak-Krieg sahen," *Themenheft Medien & Kommunikationswissenschaft*, 2005/2-3, pp. 298–313.

largely monopolized by Reuters, the BBC, AP and CNN. Hahn reasons that a "trend towards extreme politicization, polarization, personalization and emotionalization" can be observed, especially at al-Jazeera, along with a cultural, i.e. pro-Arab, bias.[21] In this respect, however, the Arab channels do not differ from their American counterparts CNN and FOX News. Their programmes, too, are imbued with a mixture of journalism and patriotism — merely from the opposite standpoint.

As an analysis of their history and structure shows, the satellite channels of the Middle East are frontier runners between journalistic cultures. On the one hand, they follow ideals of objectivity of the Anglo-American tradition of journalism. Al-Jazeera even responded to western criticism of its media coverage by decreeing an ethics code. For the channel's lack of intention to commit itself explicitly to the pan-Arab cause, it is not admitted to the Arab States Broadcasting Union (ASBU). Nor can the remaining TV stations simply be identified with the traditions of the regionally common national broadcasting service. On the other hand, all TV stations there — in spite of their legal independence — are still largely dependent economically on the respective head of State or informal powers-that-be. Moreover, at al-Jazeera and Abu-Dhabi TV the heads of State act as founder members. Hence the rarity of reports by those channels on internal affairs of their home countries.

The new Arab satellite TV stations might be expected to offer a wider variety of views from the Middle East and sources of conflict coverage. Yet they only slightly enhance the analytical quality of media coverage — though also because western TV stations often only take over images out of context. The effects of those Arab TV channels are predominantly seen in terms of their reception by the media in other parts of the world, and primarily in industrialized countries. In contrast, the driving force of al-Jazeera or similar stations in the process of democratization and secularization in that region is, in the medium term, marginal at most.

## Effects of media war coverage

Despite considerable knowledge about the general quality of war coverage and the particular political or national bias of some media outlets, and although the information policy of warring parties and related media systems has recently attracted some attention, hardly anything is known about the potential effects of war coverage, i.e. the effects on the public or media audience, and those on the political system.

The influence of war coverage on the broader public can be seen in the "rally-around-the-flag effect." Several studies show that in wartime leading

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21 Olivier Hahn, "Arabisches Satelliten-Nachrichtenfernsehen: Entwicklungsgeschichte, Strukturen und die Folgen für die Konfliktberichterstattung aus dem Nahen und Mittleren Osten," *Themenheft Medien & Kommunikationswissenschaft*, 2005/2-3, pp. 241–260.

political and military executives gain in popularity and public confidence, an effect attributed to the supportive media coverage at those times. However, this public support does not continue in the long run, but declines to the pre-war level after a few months.[22]

As for the effects of war coverage on the political system, the most prominent is probably the so-called "CNN effect." This term means the focusing of attention not only by the US news channel but by the media in general. It was originally used merely in relation to humanitarian disasters, but nowadays almost every potential influence emanating from war coverage is subsumed under that same term.[23] This comprehensiveness and the assumption of a direct media impact on politics are highly controversial. Critics do indeed concede to the media an important role in the process of war, but limit that role to humanitarian concerns. The media hence do not yet have the power to end a state of war.[24]

A current differentiation includes three more effects of war coverage which can be identified in almost every kind of international crisis:[25] the acceleration of decision-making within the political system, which is accomplished through global and simultaneous media coverage; the prevention or difficulty of achieving policy goals, due for instance to the effects of emotional media coverage on public opinion or the disclosure of arcane military operations; and, eventually, an agenda-building process within the political decision-making system. Exponents of this concept discover a reflection of the news contents in the political agenda.

Although this short review shows that there are already some interesting findings on media effects in wars, research into and analysis of the impact of the media on war-related politics have only just begun.[26] With the steadily growing significance of the media themselves as helpful instruments to the various protagonists, however, the media coverage of war and the impact of that coverage are attracting increasing attention among communication scholars. Further insights into the role of the media in wars might therefore be expected. Yet much still remains to be done before their role in modern wars can be better understood. A major problem is the lack of a joint theoretical "umbrella" in research tradition that would allow the divergent approaches in different fields of research within the social sciences and the diverse case studies to be merged.

22  Evelyn Bytzek, "Kosovokrieg, Kriegsberichterstattung und die Popularität der deutschen Regierungsparteien und -politiker," *Themenheft Medien & Kommunikationswissenschaft*, 2005/2-3, pp. 369-388.

23  Eytan Gilboa, "The CNN effect: The search for a communication theory of international relations," in *Political Communication*, No. 22, 2005, pp. 27-44; Steven Livingston, "Clarifying the CNN effect: An examination of media effects according to type of military intervention," *The Joan Shorenstein Center, Research Paper* R-18, 1997; Piers Robinson, "Theorizing the influence of media on world politics: Models of media influence on foreign policy," *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 16 (4) 2001, pp. 523-544.

24  Eytan Gilboa, *Media and Conflict: Framing Issues, Making Policy, Shaping Opinion*, Transnational, Ardsley New York, 2002.

25  Steven Livingston, *op. cit.* (note 23).

26  Christiane Eilders/Lutz M. Hagen, "Kriegsberichterstattung als Thema kommunikationswissenschaftlicher Forschung. Ein Überblick zum Forschungsstand und zu den Beiträgen in diesem Themenheft," *Themenheft Medien & Kommunikationswissenschaft*, 2005/2-3, pp. 205–221.

## Standards for war coverage and the role of the media

Even though our picture of war coverage and the role of the media in modern wars is far from complete, it should be clear that a decisive role in the evaluation of war coverage is played by standards the media are expected to meet. What are in fact the inherent functions of war coverage? What standards should be set for sound media coverage, and can the media be expected to make a contribution to peace? According to democratic theory, even in wartime the media ought to enable the citizens to politically evaluate war, its justification or legitimacy and its consequences, hence make it subject to democratic control. Comprehensive and correct information as well as independent and neutral media coverage are the preconditions for democratic governance, even in time of war. Only when the whole range of available information and ideas are processed, and when the discourse then also expounds problems and draws attention to factors that might diminish or preclude legitimacy, can public policy preferences — upon which democratic decisions are based — be informed, enlightened and authentic.

Going beyond these common professional standards, two particular functions are important but frequently forgotten. In the complexity of modern wars, information based on facts does not give the public sufficient insight. The media are therefore expected to interpret and assess the events at length. In that way they can convey meaning and relevance to the tangle of perpetually new shreds of information provided by simultaneous journalism, and can thus help to orientate the public.

Another rather plain task, which is nonetheless extremely important, is drawing public attention to a war. Only if media attention concentrates on grievous events such as war does the pressure on politics to take action increase. Considering that many wars are below the media public's threshold of attention, only few and minor political initiatives are otherwise to be expected. It goes without saying that the media are not able to deal with all wars at the same time. However, there should be an awareness of the enormous responsibility this selectivity entails.

In many cases the media are expected to contribute to peacemaking, either almost automatically through their routine coverage or consciously as a more or less influential element committed to restoring peace. There is no agreement in scientific debate as to whether a sheer reproduction of reality in every detail is in itself conducive to peace, or whether only active urging for change can be recognized as a contribution to peace, as some supporters of peace journalism claim — or indeed whether such a partisanship by the media, even in terms of peace or other universal values, is desirable at all. The question whether or not the media should actively campaign for peace or act as a neutral chronicler of events is all the more difficult to answer, as two universal values are often mutually incompatible. With regard to the latest Iraq war those values have been, for instance, human rights and peace. The journalistic self-image — even of war correspondents — is geared more to the role model of the neutral mediator than to that of an advocate of peace journalism.

As to the media's peace-making potential, even compliance with professional standards of media coverage can be seen as a substantial contribution within the limit of an independent media role as warning institutions. In that compliance, the commandment of plurality takes centre stage. It is precisely the consideration of manifold views that provides a basis for peace-making and peace-keeping. The 1978 UNESCO Declaration on the role of the media states that: "The strengthening of peace and international understanding, the promotion of human rights and the countering of racism, apartheid and incitement to war demand a free flow and a wider and better balanced dissemination of information. To this end, the mass media have a leading contribution to make. This contribution will be the more effective to the extent that the information reflects the different aspects of the subject dealt with." To make that contribution it seems that the main task of the media in wartime is to represent and to publish all points of view. This simple requirement in itself poses a real challenge in the environment of war.