

WAR ON TELEVISION: LESSONS FOR AND FROM THE GULF WAR

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'One year on - from the weather and the sea you would never guess that anything had happened'. Such was Christopher Bellamy's recent observation from aboard HMS Sheffield for *The Independent* about the ecological condition of the waters of the Persian Gulf a year after Operation Desert Storm¹. Considering the high media profile afforded to oil-smeared cormorants on glooming Saudi beaches, to blazing Kuwaiti oil-wells and to what was portrayed at the time as an ecological disaster of almost apocalyptic proportions, such an observation merely highlights the degree to which television audiences worldwide were bombarded with propaganda during the Gulf War of 1991.

The proximity of the event, combined with the paucity of official information yet available as to what precisely was going on, would normally deter the historian from making anything but the most tentative conclusions about the Gulf War. But because, in a sense, the media were the story of this war, do we really have to wait 30 years before we can begin to contextualise the phenomenon of the Gulf War as Media Event?². Communications technology has, after all, changed the temporal dimensions of news and information. Thanks, for example, to the twin arrival of accessible satellite communications and domestic video-recorders, the historian now has unprecedented access to a brave new world of television output as evidence that, sooner or later, will require the application and perhaps adaptation of the historical method that we have been developing for film sources for more than thirty years³.

It is important, however, to recognise right at the outset of any near contemporaneous investigation that there were essentially two wars going on: the war itself, fought by the coalition's combined military forces against the regime of Saddam Hussein, and the war as portrayed by the media - and that the latter did not necessarily reflect the reality of the former. It will only be possible to analyse the 'real war' once the official documents are opened, although some details have been emerging gradually to alter here and fine tune there the veracity of the media record that was projected at the time⁴. Wartime exaggerations transmitted in 'real time' are already beginning to be contextualised with the benefits of consideration and deliberation at first denied by the fast-moving media coverage. The oil fires were extinguished within a year and the clean-up operation in the Gulf, though clouded in Saudi Arabian secrecy, prevented the much vaunted crisis to desalination plants. Besides, the oil spills - because there were several of them, not one massive one as presented at the time - were nowhere near as

serious as the Exxon Valdez disaster which provided the propagandists with their most frequent public point of reference about Saddam Hussein being 'a moral pygmy'⁵. We also now know that the vast majority of bombs dropped on Iraqi forces in Kuwait and Iraq were not smart weapons, whose telegenetic images predominated during the war itself, but rather conventional 'dumb' bombs whose accuracy was in keeping with their historical performance⁶. We also now know that it is unlikely that there was as many as half a million Iraqi troops in theatre at the time of the 100 Hour Ground War, which may help to explain not only why the coalition's forces were so startlingly successful but also why comparatively few bodies were seen at the time⁷.

But there were other reasons for the latter. Judgment about the 'reality' of war on the small screen has been distorted by the experience of the Vietnam war -the exception rather than the rule in terms of media coverage of 20th century conflicts- and of its mythologisation afterwards, which influenced the US military in particular. When President Bush and his officials talked -as they so often did- of the 'Vietnam Syndrome', they were referring as much to the -questionable- belief that the media in general and television in particular had lost the United States the war in South East Asia. This time, they promised, things would be different - including the introduction of media 'guidelines' which had more in common with the British tradition of military censorship than with the constitutional rights under the First Amendment and the American 'right to know'.

Censorship, that essential counterpart to propaganda, has been present in every war of the twentieth century and the evolution of broadcasting traditions concerning issues of 'taste' and decency have added the element of self-censorship on the part of journalists and editors themselves. When critics such as John Pilger complained that the 'real war' was not being seen by audiences around the world⁸, they may have been highlighting the existence of a sophisticated coalition censorship and propaganda system but they were ignoring the degree to which broadcasters themselves were reluctant to offend their audiences by airing many of the 'blood and guts' pictures they were able to film - such as from the Amiriya bunker/shelter tragedy in Baghdad on 13 February 1991 or from the burned out convoy of Iraqi troops on the 'Highway to Hell' on the road from Kuwait City to Basra at the very end of the war⁹.

The arrangements made by both the coalition and the Iraqis for the filming of scenes of devastation differed in many respects but the result was the same. As Ian Hargreaves, Deputy Editor of the *Financial Times*, pointed out: 'the public in Britain and America will have had the impression that this was a war involving very little death and very little utter horror'¹⁰. The Iraqis wanted film of devastated civilian areas to penetrate western television in the hope that it would undermine popular support for the war. That is why they permitted western journalists, most noticeably from CNN, to remain in Baghdad while simultaneously refusing to permit journalists into occupied Kuwait. Their emphasis on the issue of 'collateral damage' was a major propaganda

theme of the war that the allies countered with their 'video game war'. The coalition, on the other hand, understood what the Iraqis did not, namely that western broadcasting standards would militate against the showing of 'real war' on screen¹¹: and their media newspool arrangements were in fact organised in such a way as to allow the filming of graphic material when it was available. Official coalition censorship was confined mainly to areas of operational security, religious issues and the sensitivity of relatives back home. The coalition was also helped by the fact that there were comparatively few scenes of devastation for the newspools to see. That was the advantage of the air war, a notoriously difficult aspect of war for the media to cover, and of the rapid 'Hail Mary' movement into southern Iraq which advanced so quickly that journalists were unable to get their reports back to the Forward Transmission Units which were left far behind of the charge until after it was all over - by which time the story had moved on.

These factors aside, the Gulf War has provided a unique opportunity for the historian. Thanks to global satellite communications systems which utilise comparatively accessible links between reporter and newsroom - feeds or downlinks - the historian can actually compare what is being said at source with what is actually transmitted for public consumption. It is the equivalent in filmic terms of having all the out-takes which are left on the cutting-room floor and then binned available for scrutiny. Anyone with a satellite dish and the appropriate transponders can monitor this and provided the VCR's *record* button is pressed, it can now be played back, scrutinised, evaluated, verified and criticised. It has become a record like any other. As such, however, it has to be treated with considerable caution. Apart from being an important source for what has been transmitted at a particular moment in time, what is it a record of? How reliable is it as a source of information? How and under what conditions was it made? What was the purpose of making it? What impact did it have? Historians dealing with this brave new world of television as evidence are already familiar with these types of questions. But before they and others can deal with television's particular characteristics as an audio-visual record, they must first understand the medium itself.

We need, for example, to bear in mind a wide variety of factors which influence the text. Television, particularly in the United States, is a consumer industry and, especially today, a highly competitive one. It is rooted in certain technologies, the creative and cost-effective utilisation of which is vital to its appeal and thus to its success. Moreover, television cameras only 'see' what they are pointed at; what goes on behind the camera operator's back can only be reported by words and is not part of the visual record. The angle of vision is in turn determined by what that operator either can point at or which he decrees or hopes will be of interest to his editors. The result is to amplify what is before the camera lens and to minimise the significance of what is behind it.

Live television is another aspect of this phenomenon but with different rules of operation; there is always the risk that the direct point-to-multipoint communicative

process of live TV, by-passing the editors, will contain images which require explanation now denied by the instantaneous nature of the transmission. This can be both exciting for audiences and dangerous to authorities wishing to control the context in which the images are presented and perceived, as in wartime. During the Gulf War, the race to get a story first often meant that television companies became victims of their own technology in so far as the normal editorial processes, which involve a cumulative application of judgment and context, were being by-passed due to the excitement of the event taking place before the camera's angle of vision. With the print media, for example, news passes through a series of editorial processes that takes considerably longer to reach the audience with the result that the non-visual, what goes on behind the camera if you like, is also incorporated to a greater extent than on live television. The medium of live television as a vehicle for relating news instantaneously thus assumes the potential equally for relating uncontextualised or even false information immediately. As well as conveying, uniquely, a sense of involvement and immediacy, it can thus also amplify and distort. It might indeed be both a window and a mirror, but television is also a flawed microscope.

A celebrated example of this from the Gulf War came with the media 'scudfest' which followed the launching of the first Iraqi Al-Hussein missiles against Israel and Saudi Arabia on the second day of the war. Initially dependent on tightly controlled coalition media arrangements, the thousand or so journalists who flocked to Riyadh and Dharhan were themselves able to feel more directly involved in the war once they were able to report first hand on what it was like to be near the receiving end of an incoming Scud missile. The reports and pictures they were able to file, in other words, provided them with an opportunity to describe war for themselves rather than relying upon the testimony of pilots or military audio-visual wizardry.

The 'scudfest' began, like the war itself had done, on American prime time. CBS was quick off the mark when at 19:12 EST on the 17 January, Tom Fenton in Tel Aviv reported that a 'huge blast' had been heard in the city. He was telephoning from inside a sealed room. Then at 19:23 EST, CNN went over to Wolf Blitzer at the Pentagon who reported the news that the first attacks against Israel had taken place although it was unclear whether the missiles were carrying chemical warheads. CNN then went over to Alex Claude of JCS Radio in Tel Aviv who gave a live audio report saying that they had been told to put their gas masks on. He could hear explosions as he spoke. It was well after midnight in Israel on the 18th. For the rest of the night, there was speculation as to whether the explosions had been caused by Scud attacks and whether chemicals had been used and whether the Israelis would retaliate, although on NBC Martin Fletcher was at first giving a much calmer account to Tom Brokaw in which he stated that the first explosion was not chemical. At 02:33 (local time) CNN carried its first pictures of its Jerusalem office where bureau chief Larry Register was seen on the phone in the office surrounded by people wearing gas masks. A wobbly shoulder camera enhanced the

tension as Register looked nervously out of the windows: 'And I thought I heard the explosions about 20 minutes ago'. Crew members donned their gas masks ostentatiously before the camera. 'Don't open the window, please', said the anchor as Register put his mask on. Register then transmitted his report through the muffled gas mask and microphone. At 02:46 on NBC, Martin Fletcher in Tel Aviv joined in when he was interviewed wearing his gas mask: 'at least one gas warhead, at least one conventional warhead, we know that... we have confirmation that the victims of chemical war have been taken to that hospital'. Brokaw replied: 'It is a very bad situation, getting much worse moment by moment. It seems to me absolutely unavoidable for the Israelis to stay out if that is the case'. Meanwhile, for several hours of dramatic television, CNN's cameras were pointing at the wrong place. In fact it was all in a sense a non-event; Jerusalem was not attacked. Some 25 miles away Tel Aviv was, but not with chemicals. It had certainly not been turned into a 'crematorium', as Baghdad radio maintained.

Dazzling television this may have been, but what can it tell us about the image of war that was presented to audiences via the most pervasive medium of all in this, the most high profile media war in history? Of course truth was a major casualty: that is the first reality of war, especially when so many forces are at work - by military censors, by the restrictions on access to information, by the gatekeeping nature of journalism itself - to prevent an accurate picture of what was actually happening from reaching the audiences in whose name the 30 nation strong coalition was operating on behalf of the New World Order. But the sheer scale of the coverage - by more than a thousand journalists in Saudi Arabia, by the unique historical presence of western reporters in an enemy capital under fire, by 24 hour saturation radio and television coverage - provided an illusion of open coverage that detracted attention away from what was not being said or done. Only that which was deemed acceptable by the warring partners was permitted but, thanks to the presence of western journalists in Baghdad, the illusion was created that war was being fought out in full view of a global audience. But the absence of cameras in Kuwait or at the Iraqi front line meant that the neither the main reason for the war, nor the battlefields where it was mainly won and lost, were being seen. It was in the interests and in the power of neither side to let this happen. An old axiom will need to be amended in light of the Gulf War. In war in the television age, the first casualty is context. And although the Gulf War will undoubtedly be remembered as CNN's war or television's war, it was really no such thing. The conflict belonged to the coalition's armed forces, and to the victors went the spoils of the information war.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

- (1) 'Gulf Wildlife survives the spills of war', *The Independent*, 22 January 1992.
- (2) The 30 year reference is, of course, a reference to the British Thirty Year Rule which will not permit the public scrutiny of official records until three decades after the event. Too often do

British historians regard this irritating rule as a deterrent to undertaking more recent work. Given that it is likely that more information will be more rapidly forthcoming from American sources about the Gulf War under the Freedom of Information Act, and that the British contribution (Operation GRANBY) to Desert Storm constituted only about 5% of the total, this need not apply here.

(3) The research for this paper is based upon the most comprehensive recording project of a conflict ever undertaken by an academic department. Between January and March 1991, the Institute of Communications Studies at the University of Leeds conducted comprehensive recording of BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Sky News (carrying NBC and CBS programmes) and CNN, together with more selective monitoring of BR3 (Germany), TF1 (France), RAI Uno (Italy), Gorizont (Soviet) and various satellite feeds.

(4) Apart from the sleight of anniversary programmes transmitted by television stations around the world, the most notable scholarly investigations to have appeared quickly are D. HIRO, *From Desert Shield to Desert Storm* (London: Paladin, 1992) and Philip M. TAYLOR, *War and the Media: propaganda and persuasion in the Gulf War* (Manchester University Press, 1992). The most significant memories by media people are John SIMPSON, *From the House of War: John Simpson in the Gulf* (London: Arrow Books, 1991) and Robert WEINER, *Live from Baghdad: Gathering news at Ground Zero* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

(5) This was US Marine Commander Walter Booner's phase following the breaking of ITN's story about the camarants, transmitted world-wide by CNN. See BBC's One O'clock News, 27 January 1991.

(6) *The Washington Post*, 18 March 1991.

(7) Although original estimates of the Iraqi death toll ranged from 40,000 to 100,000, a year after the war Charles Horner, the allied air commander, estimated that the figure was more likely to be nearer 15,000. See Patrick COCKBURN, 'Lower death toll helped Saddam', *The Independent*, 5 February 1992.

(8) J. PILGER, 'Myth Makers', *The Guardian*, 7 January 1991 and 'A One Sided Bloodfest', *The Guardian*, 8 March 1991. *The Guardian* also published a piece by Jean BAUDRILLARD on 11 January 1991 entitled 'The Reality Gulf' whose postmodernistic approach has been attacked by Christopher NORRIS in his recent book, *Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals and the Gulf War* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1992).

(9) The Iraqis lifted all censorship restrictions on the day of the shelter/bunker incident, hoping that the scenes would cause such revulsion in the west that they would provoke an increase in anti-war sentiment. Even though the networks self-censored the pictures in the same way they would edit a motorway or train crash, evidence would suggest that they would have failed to alter public attitudes towards the war outside the Middle East. See David E. MORRISON, *Television and the Gulf War* (London: John Libbey, 1992). Far more graphic scenes of carnage from the battle of Mutlah Gap than were shown at the time can be seen on CNN's video-history of the war, *Desert Storm: the Victory* (Turner Home Entertainment [sic], 1991).

(10) 'The Information War', Channel 4, transmitted 21 May 1991.

(11) One example of a western crew which was able to film inside wartime Iraq comparatively freely was that which accompanied Ramsay Clark on his fact-finding mission at the start of February. The major US networks would not touch Jon Alpert's film of the extent of damage caused by allied bombing to Iraq's civilian population and to the country's infrastructure.