

# Keeping the News Media Honest: How the News Media Covered the Gulf War

By S. Robert Lichter

**T**he national media have become the eyes and ears of modern America. They are displacing traditional institutions like schools, religion, and family in teaching social values and forging the public consciousness. And what they teach can make or break individuals, ideas, and institutions. Indeed, the rapid growth of influence by the media over the last quarter century has raised, once again, the age-old question "Who will watch the watchdogs?"

We are trying to answer that question at the Center for Media and Public Affairs. Today, more than ever, the public needs an independent watchdog to critically scrutinize the media and their influence. But to be effective, media analysis needs to take a form that cannot be ignored or dismissed. It has to be presented in a language the general audience can understand. It needs to provide regular and highly visible reports that are accurate, fair and timely and that quickly identify key aspects of media coverage. This is the mission of the Center for Media and Public Affairs. We are a non-partisan, non-profit media research organization that is unique in producing ongoing media analysis that combines visibility and public impact with scientific rigor. Instead of simply letting the media set the public agenda, we put the media on the agenda. We make media coverage part of the public debate.

What sets us apart from other media watchdog organizations is the use of scientific content analysis. It is the equivalent in media analysis of scientific polling in public opinion analysis. As in scientific polling, we use tests and procedures designed to produce objective results. Every statement by a source or reporter is tabulated, categorized, and fed into a computerized data bank. The result is a statistical profile of media coverage that provides a scientific basis for judging its fairness and accuracy. The difference between casual monitoring and scientific analysis of the news is similar to the difference between man on the street interviews and scientific polling. Thus, our studies provide a reliable portrait of media coverage that can't be dismissed as subjective or partisan.

**The Pentagon and the Press.** The importance of our work can be gauged in relation to the biggest story in television history—the Persian Gulf war. If Vietnam was the "living room war," the Persian Gulf was the "instant replay" war. For the first time in history the home audience could watch a major military conflict unfold on television virtually—and sometimes actually—as it happened. This extraordinary development opened up a second front in the battle: the struggle to control television images. For the story of the Persian Gulf war ultimately has to include the running battle between the Pentagon and the press, the televised propaganda efforts of Saddam Hussein, and the impact of a video war on the audience at home. It is also a story of America's efforts to learn from the past, to avoid "another Vietnam" and to understand its future in a global village that is increasingly shaped by American media. And finally, this is a story of an independent and sometimes oppositional media in conflict with the public's desire for journalists to play on the U.S. "team."

It's no longer news that the war is over and the media lost. The military's implacable instinct to withhold information went headlong against the media's insatiable thirst for that same informa-

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tion. The battle for hearts and minds on the home front was waged daily in televised Pentagon briefings and prestige press op-ed pages, and it ended in a rout. This was demonstrated in polls taken during and after the war by the Times-Mirror Corporation, which owns *The Los Angeles Times*, *Newsday*, and other media properties. From the media's perspective these polls found good news and bad news. The good news is that the public liked the coverage. The bad news is that the public liked the censorship even more. In effect, the public was happy with censored coverage. About eight out of ten Americans rated the job the media did favorably, but even higher proportions approved of the censorship and either favored the pool system as it existed or would have tightened it even further.

These numbers changed very little every time. After the war, the public's image of the media became somewhat more favorable, the public's image of the military became much more favorable, and even more people approved of the censorship. There was a generalized halo effect: the media, which often decry being blamed for bringing bad news, are now rewarded for bringing good news to the public. But many journalists see this as a kind of booby prize. Why? Well, The Times-Mirror Poll asked people to balance the relative importance of censorship for the sake of national security against the news media's ability to report stories that it feels are in the public interest. This question in the past has almost always produced about an even split among Americans. This time the survey finds a nearly two-to-one majority who feel that censorship for national security is more important than the media's ability to report the news the way it wants to report it.

Of course, the public was divided over other questions that arose during the war—whether Saddam Hussein had too much access to the media as a platform for his propaganda, whether news organizations should have reported censored news from Baghdad during the war (which General Schwarzkopf publicly called “aiding and abetting the enemy”), and so forth. These are news controversies. But, as Schwarzkopf's statement makes clear, they are also highly political controversies. So it isn't surprising that in the afterglow of victory over Iraq, Secretary of State Baker could tell those attending the annual Gridiron Dinner, “The Gulf was quite a victory. Yet who could not be moved by the sight of that poor, demoralized rabble, outwitted, outflanked, outmaneuvered by the U.S. military. But I think, given time, the press will bounce back.” And I think that is a problem for the American media, which define themselves more and more as a permanent opposition against political authority. They are going to win some and they are going to lose some. The military and political leadership's loss of credibility in Vietnam was to some extent the media's gain. This time it may work the other way around.

**TV News Coverage.** If news has become political in the sense of being enmeshed in the political process, it is essential to ask how the media actually did cover the war. There are various views on this. They run from General Schwarzkopf's opinion that journalists aided and abetted the enemy to views on the Left (which you can read in the journalism reviews) that say the media were cheerleaders for the war and helped make war inevitable. This is where our procedures come into play. We looked at the evening news, sound bite by sound bite, and found out exactly who said what and who showed what—how the balance of images and opinions shaped up.

The Persian Gulf war triggered more network news stories in a shorter period of time than any event in television history. From January 15 through the cease-fire on February 27, ABC, CBS, and NBC broadcast Gulf-related stories on their evening newscasts, with a total air time of over 53 hours. War coverage averaged 14 stories lasting 25 minutes per network per night, more than the entire normal network evening newscast. (Many wartime broadcasts were expanded to an hour.)

So this was the biggest story in television history. And how did the media report the story? If you count the positive and negative remarks made about the U.S. policies in the Gulf during this period on TV news, you find that nearly three out of five opinions expressed on U.S. Gulf policies

were negative—59 percent. That is almost as negative as coverage of the Iraqi government's policies, which were criticized by 63 percent of sources. Of course, the criticisms of George Bush were generally less negative than they were of Saddam Hussein. But I think this reflects something very interesting, something that could have provoked recriminations and a very rancorous debate had the war gone poorly: TV tried to get the other side of this debate, and not simply opposition within the United States but also the opposition from Iraq itself, as well as other foreign critics such as Jordan. That is the reason coverage was so critical of U.S. policy.

Consider this example of a negative statement on U.S. policy. The Iraqi Minister of Information told ABC's Bill Blakemore, who was stationed in Baghdad: "these civilian deaths mean George Bush is like Hitler and is a war criminal..." It is rather extraordinary that a country at war would provide a national forum for the enemy country's Minister of Information to criticize our own leader. I think this would have become a major source of debate had the war not gone so well and had it dragged on. By contrast, and this is one reason why the Left criticizes the coverage, the media did lead cheers for American soldiers and American weaponry, in the sense that 95 percent of all the evaluations of American armed forces were positive. So while the media didn't support the policy makers, they did support the troops.

You find a very similar pattern of policy criticism if you look at statements on the war itself. That is, should we have gone to war or not? Is this a war we should be fighting or not? We found that opponents of the war outnumbered supporters on the evening news by 57 to 43 percent. For example, one protester was quoted as condemning "this needless, unnecessary war against Iraq." By contrast, an example of a positive statement would be another demonstrator saying, "As far as I am concerned, the President is trying to do the right thing by trying to oust Saddam Hussein from Kuwait." So when we measure media coverage we are looking at very straightforward statements of criticism or support. We are not trying to infer possible positive or negative opinions from news events. We are looking at clear judgments.

You can also look at this somewhat differently by asking how much media attention was paid to demonstrations of support or opposition to the war. By this measure, the media advantage enjoyed by the war's opponents widened to almost a two to one margin. That is, nearly twice as many news stories focused on anti-war demonstrations as on pro-war demonstrations. Interestingly, this predominance of anti-war voices contrasts sharply with the Times-Mirror polls, which found that three times as many Americans attended pro-war rallies as anti-war rallies. So, the reality is that the demonstrators tended to be on the pro-war side, but the TV news focused more on the anti-war side.

**Video Images.** Television news consists of pictures as well as words. And critics from the Left condemn the visual coverage of what they call a Nintendo War. They claim that whatever words got said, the verbal debate was overwhelmed by the visual images of smart bombs hitting their targets. It is absolutely true that these video images were quite novel and attention-getting. On the other hand, if you actually add up every single camera shot of combat activities (most of which are air combat pictures) and compare them to every single camera shot of civilian damage, you find out that the latter actually exceed the former. The networks aired 1,177 pictures of combat, compared to 1,217 shots of civilian damage. This is one more indication that the news may have been managed by the Pentagon, but the journalists were not cowed by the Pentagon. They were out there trying to present the other side of the story. In any case, this was no Nintendo war. If one argues that the combat pictures were favorable to the Bush Administration while civilian casualty pictures and civilian damage were favorable to the opponents of the war, you have a visual balance on TV news.

Given this portrait, I think it is notable that the public supported the military censorship. Because, of course, wartime is special. When the interest of the journalists and officials seem to conflict, most Americans usually give priority to the public's right to know. But when the nation puts the lives of its young people on the line, the situation becomes quite different. And the public may wish to exercise its right *not* to know certain information in order to preserve the lives of those who are defending it. I think that is what happened in this case.

**The Journalist's Image.** Beyond the specific case of wartime, we may be seeing something else that is significant. The public rejected the equation of its own interest with that of the media. That is, the public's self-perceived need to know did not correspond to the journalist's desire to cover the story with fewer restrictions. I think the reasons for this disparity have to do with changes in both the nature of reporting and the social standing of journalists. Polls have shown for years that two aspects of journalism consistently draw the most public ire: personal arrogance and professional negativism. There is considerable popular resentment against the perceived willingness of journalists to get the story at any cost, and to emphasize bad news over good news and social failures over successes. This image is strong enough to have generated new popular culture stereotypes, such as we have seen in the "Die Hard" film portrayals of a journalist willing to endanger innocent people to win a Pulitzer prize. And NBC's "Saturday Night Live" really captured this with its parody of a military press briefing in which journalists ask questions like "Are we planning an invasion of Kuwait, and if so, when would that be?" and "What would be the one piece of information that would be most dangerous for the Iraqis to know?" It is very telling that "Saturday Night Live," with its young, hip, urban audience, felt this was suitable material for satire.

Such portraits of journalists as potentially obnoxious and obtuse express a growing tendency in the public to view the press as "them" rather than "us" and to assert that their interest does not necessarily represent "ours." This, in turn, reflects a public view of the media as a powerful institution that at times is an essential servant of the public, but at other times is out of touch with ordinary people. In a single generation, the popular image of the journalist as an ink-stained wretch has been changed to that of a rich and glamorous celebrity. The fact that both images may be distorted stereotypes doesn't lessen their emotional power. It is not the fault of Arthur Kent that he is featured as a "hunk" by *People* magazine. It is not the fault of Peter Arnett that his planned marriage to an attractive young woman shows up in the supermarket tabloids. But these developments illustrate dramatic changes in the social position of journalists in America, especially television journalists. Journalists still like to see themselves as outsiders who represent the "little guy." To many ordinary Americans, however, they have become insiders who sometimes need to be taken down a peg.

In this context I think the Gulf War was a defining event for American journalists, just as Vietnam was a quarter century ago. It created new media stars, it established new practices for reporting and gathering news and, indeed, of managing news by government. It changed the relationship between the media and the government just as it changed the public image of journalism. We are just beginning to see the reverberations of the Gulf War, not only for America's image of itself, but in the role that the media play in American society. And as this media drama plays itself out, we at the Center for Media and Public Affairs will be there to see how it turns out.

