

**Lewis, J., Brookes, R., Mosdell, N. and Threadgold, T. (2006) *Shoot First and Ask Questions Later: Media Coverage of the 2003 Iraq War*. Peter Lang, New York (p.94–100)**

Many of our open-ended questions directed at editors and journalists were intended to elicit their views about the policy of embedded reporting as a central component of U.S./UK military news management strategy. Much of the criticism levelled at embedding has been aimed at the dependence of correspondents-on their units for food and water, transport and safety, suggesting that this close and dependent relationship compromises the ability of correspondents to be critical of military personnel. All of our respondents expressed an awareness of this issue.

Many of the correspondents said that they could not help developing friendships with military personnel as a result of their common situation. Indeed, developing friendly relations with the troops was important for correspondents in helping them to do their job. Phil Wardman recalled how Jeremy Thompson made himself popular with the troops by down-linking Sky Sports for them. According to Wardman, Sky deliberately assigned reporters to units who would be likely to get along with the troops. At the same time, correspondents who discussed the issue denied that any friendships formed with the soldiers influenced how they reported the war.

A number of examples illustrate the potential for the position of the embedded journalist to be compromised. A number of journalists reported occasions where they were uncomfortably close to the soldiers they accompanied. Ben Brown recalled how a soldier had saved his life by shooting an Iraqi sniper:

There was an Iraqi who had been playing dead the other side of a wall very close to us, and he had been pretending to be dead. And he jumped up with an RPG, and he was about to fire it at us, because we were just standing there, and this other Warrior just shot him with their big machine gun, and there was a big hole in his chest. That was the closest I felt to being almost too close to the troops, because me and my cameraman both felt a sense of elation that this guy was dead, which is something I've never felt before ... Because if he hadn't been, then he would have killed ... afterward I sought out the gunner who had done that and shook his hand.

On another occasion, Gavin Hewitt noticed a vehicle approaching his resting unit. He saw men getting equipment out of the back. When he pointed this out to his unit, the Americans immediately opened fire. To Hewitt's relief, the truck was full of rocket-propelled grenades and exploded—the Iraqis had been about to attack.<sup>1</sup>

Clive Myrie was quoted in the documentary *War Spin* as recalling the following:

There was bullets flying everywhere. We get out of the Land Rover and we hide in a ditch. One of the Marines said, "Why don't you make yourself useful? And he's throwing these flares at me. And he's throwing the flares at me, and I'm throwing them at the guy who's got to light them and send them off into the sky, and I'm thinking, Why, what am I doing here?"<sup>2</sup>

A number of such incidents—when the independence of journalists from the soldiers they were embedded with was in danger of being compromised—emerged in our interviews. This does not mean that journalists in such a situation are incapable of filing critical reports if need be. It does mean that journalists and editors need to maintain awareness of the myriad ways in which this dependence might affect their objectivity.

## Censorship

When asked whether military personnel ever tried to censor their reports, most of the correspondents we interviewed either recalled no attempts to censor or trivial requests to make minor alterations, which could easily be refused, with one significant exception. Romilly Weeks described how the commander of her unit attempted to stop her filing a report on a failed aid drop in al-Zubayr. It is worth quoting from her account at length:

WEEKS: The town had various militia headquarters in it—it had been quite unstable, and it was by no means secured. The army was under a lot of pressure to get the aid in as quickly as possible—there was all this stuff from Kuwait which was rotting—and they went in with their convoys, and a mass of people came out to meet them. I think there was one water lorry, maybe two trucks of food, and there were clearly too many people and too few soldiers. This was the first time that they had come into contact with Iraqi civilians, and nobody knew how they were going to react. The soldiers quickly became overpowered, and people started jumping on the trucks and grabbing the food for themselves. It was complete chaos, and people were being crushed and the soldiers were getting very frightened. It felt like it could turn into a riot...it was a really tense mood. Then the convoy and the crowd got fired at—I was told later by militia from a nearby building—and everybody fled. It was complete panic and they were climbing over each other to get out of there. There was a surge of people rushing down this road and the army retreated in complete chaos as well, not even stopping to shut the backs of the lorries so there was food spilling out of the back of the lorries.... Anyway, it was a very interesting thing to report, it was the first aid drop, it had gone badly, but not through any particular fault of the army. When we got back to base and the colonel was briefed on what had happened—it was late at night by this stage—he immediately summoned us, and he was very much of the attitude that we were under his command, that we were part of his regiment, and we should do as we were told and he said, "Right, that report won't go out." So I said, "Well, I'm afraid it has to, this is what I'm here for. It's not negative, it's balanced, I just reported what I saw," and he said, "No, I'm telling you that that report won't go out." He didn't even give a reason. It was just that I should blindly accept his word because he saw himself as the superior commanding officer. So we had this argument in front of half of the regiment and I ended by saying, "You're trying to censor us," and it sort of stopped there without any conclusion.

She then "went away and finished the report and then tried to get transport back to the hub—and of course transport couldn't be arranged that night."

To some extent, the significance of this episode is that it was unusual for this war. The blatant attempt by a military commander to censor a report that he felt would have portrayed in his unit in a poor light seems to have been unmatched by the experiences of other journalists we interviewed, although elsewhere Juliet Bremner—along with other embeds—reported that she was not allowed to report the words of General Conway in his prebattle address to the troops.<sup>3</sup>

It does demonstrate that not all commanders in the British army followed the principles underlying the MoD policy on embeds. It also illustrates that a reporter *could* maintain his or her independence and oppose the commander of the unit, even if—as spokes in the system—he or she were dependent on that unit for support in so doing. To draw the conclusion that there was little censorship, however, would be complacent. There may have been few attempts to "blue-pencil" reports, but many of our interviews provided documentary evidence of how the implementation of the embedded policy on the ground restricted journalists' ability to report what they wanted to report.

Firstly, there was restriction of movement. Alex Thomson told us:

I am still amazed by people who will tell you that they weren't censored. Censorship is restricting someone's freedom of movement as much as it is restricting what someone can and cannot film.

He recalled an incident when the military tried to stop his cameraman going off to film a crashed helicopter for "security" reasons (it should be noted, though, that his cameraman did get this footage). Carl Dinnen recalls an occasion when he couldn't get to a story because he was tied to the transport provided by his unit:

There was one location which we tried to get to where we had been told that there were a lot of dead, an Iraqi encampment that had been attacked.... We tried to get there, but weren't able to get a

convoy together to go with us in time before we had to move on again, so we didn't even make it to that one.

And while the military could attempt to restrict journalists' freedom of movement to report negative stories, they could also attempt to aid journalists to report stories that would represent the case for the war in a positive light. Indeed, the ability to encourage "positive" reporting is clearly part of the Pentagon's media strategy. The following incident illustrates how this would happen:

DINNEN: An infantry battalion put out a call to all units in the area saying that they had discovered a terrorist training camp in the north of Baghdad, and anyone who had an embedded journalist should send them down, and they would be shown it.... Our colonel was happy to put together a couple of Humvees and some men. We were shown lots of weaponry that had been stored in half-built houses. The interpretation by the unit that found it was that these houses were never intended as houses, these were intended to look like houses from the air, and in fact, they were only ever intended for storing ammunition. I was skeptical of that and didn't report it—there was no way of knowing whether it was true or not. Then they took us to a camp which had a lot of anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish murals around it, and it was obviously a military training camp of some sort.... A lot of the targets in the shooting range had Stars of David on their head and things like "Jewish filth" written in Arabic under them.... Our colonel had also discovered a huge picture of Saddam Hussein grinning sitting in front of the twin towers as they were hit by the planes on 9/11. I think all of this in his mind had made this seem like a connection between the regime and terrorists. We were slightly skeptical when we found out that his interpreter was...a former Arabic interpreter from the Israeli army, which set the alarm bells going.... A visiting general passed through to take a look, and he told us that he didn't actually believe that it was a terrorist training camp at all.... That was the only time when I came across someone who was really trying to manipulate the media.... He also took us to see some missile warhead...and some missile parts, we had no way of assessing the significance of them. They looked pretty old, and they wouldn't have gone anywhere in forty-five minutes anyway, they were parts, really. He felt this all backed it up. I mean, we broadcast it, but we were skeptical.

Second, there was censorship through operational security restrictions. None of the correspondents we interviewed expressed any problem with restrictions in the name of operational security. If they had breached these restrictions, they would have been in contravention of the Pentagon and MoD ground rules agreement, and they may also have endangered their own safety. But a debate could be had about the point at which operational security restrictions actually inhibit a journalist's ability to convey the whole picture of the war. In discussing his role in reporting the Basra uprising (see below), Richard Gaisford revealed that:

This is the key issue I couldn't report at the time. I knew where the information inside of Basra was coming from. It wasn't just from some disaffected Iraqi, it was from British Special Forces. British Special Forces had been on the ground in the city of Basra. We knew this, we'd met them. They were staying either at the forward point in our camp or in Basra—the commanding officer confirmed this was where the information was coming from, but it was the one restriction on that night for their safety that I could not report that they were in Basra. Very little information has come out about the Special Forces throughout all of this.... It was the SAS and the SBS who had been around Basra...and this is my supposition—and anecdotally it's backed up by the soldiers—they were stirring up trouble....We weren't allowed to say it was Special Forces, because I was instructed that it would endanger their lives.

Third, there was censorship through restrictions on equipment, especially for the "spokes" trying to get reports back to the FTU. Romilly Weeks illustrates this in her account of the procedure for getting out reports:

We could have just sent the tapes back, but then I wouldn't have been in control of the editing. At the beginning, we had to go with a tank escort.... Even by the time that we left, the roads were not secure.... That was a way of controlling us. We had to behave to a certain extent, or it was difficult to get our report out.

Some of our interviewees speculated that safety concerns themselves would act as a form of censorship. According to Mark Austin, "One danger, I think, is that the MoD and the British forces start to use safety as a reason to stop journalists going into an area, and I think that is likely to happen, almost safety and fear becomes a form of censorship."

## The Threat to Balance and Context

What emerged from all of our interviews with news directors, editors, and journalists was a consensual, coherent view of how reports from embedded correspondents should be used. Embedded correspondents were very valuable in providing firsthand reports from the front line, but they could only give one side of the story. The use of reports from embedded correspondents was regarded as legitimate as long as they were part of a *balanced* picture.

Our interviewees cited a number of examples of the type of story that would provide such balance. Some cited unilateral correspondents based in Baghdad and were critical of the American networks for pulling these reporters on safety grounds. According to Lindsey Hilsum:

The Americans only saw one side of the war on television.... There were a lot of journalists in Baghdad, probably two hundred...everybody was there, apart from the Americans. Only the Americans could not see what was happening in Baghdad.

Others cited unilateral correspondents based in the battlefield—although a number wondered whether it was now possible to operate as a true unilateral after the death of Terry Lloyd. Other types of reports mentioned as providing a complete picture included briefings from military spokesman and reports by specialist correspondents.

At the same time, many of our respondents expressed real concerns about the way in which the United States prosecuted this war, making the battlefield much more dangerous for unilateral correspondents to operate. Many regarded the death of Lloyd as a turning point. For Richard Sambrook, from that moment, "We realized what we'd like to be able to do simply wasn't going to be possible, on safety grounds, and I fear that will be in true in future conflicts as well. I think it is unfortunate because it is an important counterbalance when you're able to do it."

Many of our interviewees regarded the deployment of roving unilateral correspondents as absolutely crucial in providing the counterbalance to the embedded correspondents. However, these unilateral correspondents need to be genuine unilateral, not subject to controls or manipulation. Mark Austin described how some unilateral were working in ways that reproduced the kinds of limits the embeds were under:

You sit in the Hilton Hotel in Kuwait, you wait for daily press trips to safe, well-prepared areas, which everybody will go on, real media-circus operations and you just sit there and wait until your number comes up, and off you go. In my view, this no way for a journalist to cover the war.

Romilly Weeks also recalled encountering such an expedition organized for this type of unilateral correspondent:

A lot of the unilateral ended up being almost as tightly controlled by the army as we were.... We went to Umm Qasr one day and were doing something about the aid stocks, and there was a day trip organized from Kuwait for unilateral journalists, who had all come on this big bus with the army, and they were being shown exactly what the army wanted them to see. So they were shown a water pipeline being turned on, which had actually been going for three days or something.

As an embedded correspondent, Weeks was in a position to know how such an expedition had been set up for the journalists. This is a very important point, because it problematizes much of the criticism of embedded reporting based on the assumption that unilateral correspondents are somehow working outside constraints. By contrast, concerns over safety amongst journalists and editors could impose different, but in many ways, *more* limiting constraints on unilateral correspondents' access to the war zone than those embedded reporters experienced.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Journalists at War", debate organized by the Press Freedom Network, London, 2 May 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Kampner, J. 2003. *Correspondent: War Spin*. BBC. First broadcast on BBC 2, 18 May.

<sup>3</sup> "Journalists at War", debate organized by the Press Freedom Network, London, 2 May 2003.