PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM

Embedded Reporters: What Are Americans Getting?

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Embedded Reporters: What Are Americans Getting?

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has suggested we are getting only "slices" of the war. Other observers have likened the media coverage to seeing the battlefield through "a soda straw."

The battle for Iraq is war as we've never it seen before. It is the first full-scale American military engagement in the age of the Internet, multiple cable channels and a mixed media culture that has stretched the definition of journalism.

The most noted characteristic of the media coverage so far, however, is the new system of "embedding" some 600 journalists with American and British troops.

What are Americans getting on television from this "embedded" reporting? How close to the action are the "embeds" getting? Who are they talking to? What are they talking about?

To provide some framework for the discussion, the Project for Excellence in Journalism conducted a content analysis of the embedded reports on television during three of the first six days of the war. The Project is affiliated with Columbia University and funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts.

The embedded coverage, the research found, is largely anecdotal. It's both exciting and dull, combat focused, and mostly live and unedited. Much of it lacks context but it is usually rich in detail. It has all the virtues and vices of reporting only what you can see.

In particular:

- In an age when the press is often criticized for being too interpretive, the overwhelming majority of the embedded stories studied, 94%, were primarily factual in nature.
- Most of the embedded reports studied—6 out of 10—were live and unedited accounts.
- Viewers were hearing mostly from reporters, not directly from soldiers or other sources. In eight out of 10 stories we heard from reporters only.
- This is battle coverage. Nearly half of the embedded reports—47%—described military action or the results.
- While dramatic, the coverage is not graphic. Not a single story examined showed pictures of people being hit by fired weapons.

Over the course of reviewing the coverage, Project analysts also developed a series of more subjective impressions of embedding. Often the best reports were those that were carefully written and edited. Some were essentially radio reporting on TV. Technology made some reports stand out but got in the way when it was used for its own sake. Too often the rush to get information on air live created confusion, errors and even led journalists to play the game of "Telephone," in which partial accounts become distorted and exaggerated in the retelling.

On balance, however, Americans seem far better served by having the embedding system than they were from more limited press pools during the Gulf War of 1991 or only halting access to events in Afghanistan. Moreover, the first week of the war hints that fears that the embedding system would mostly just co-opt the press or would fatally risk military security in time may wane.

The study examined stories from embedded reporters in three of the first six days of the coverage (Friday March 21, Saturday March 22 and Monday March 24). These encompass days in which ground troops began their push into Iraq, when they first encountered serious resistance and the first day that some began to suggest that U.S. troop momentum had slowed.

The study examined the traditional key viewing hours for news each day, from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m., on the three major broadcast networks and two cable channels (ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN and Fox News) as well as the evening news programs for the broadcast networks and the analogous hour-long evening news programs on cable. This consisted of the following programs: ABC's Good Morning America, CBS Early Show, NBC's Today Show, CNN's American Morning, Fox & Friends, ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, CNN's Wolf Blitzer Reports and Fox's Special Report with Brit Hume.

In the 40.5 hours of programming examined over those three days, the five networks studied aired 108 embedded reports.

Each story was coded for such items as topic, extent of editing, sourcing, and nature of the footage. In addition to this content analysis, Project analysts also recorded more subjective impressions about the risks and potentials of the embedded reporting based on the stories they saw. These impressions are based on the networks and cable channels listed above as well as two news outlets not included in the formal coding, PBS and MSNBC.

Americans themselves seem to be conflicted about embedding. A survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that overall, 58% of Americans said embedded reporters "are a good thing." Of the 34% who said it was "a bad thing," most are worried that it is providing too much information that could help the enemy.[1]

But the tracking survey also found as time went on, people were more likely to say they felt depressed, frightened, tired out, and saddened by watching the coverage.

LIVE AND UNEDITED VERSUS TAPED PACKAGES

In general, the embedded reports tended toward immediacy over reflection, though this depended on the day, and it differed by medium.

Overall, 61% of embedded reports were live and unedited.[2]

Only roughly a quarter of the embedded reports studied (28%) were traditional "taped packages," in which correspondents had written a script and video tape had been reviewed and edited to tell that story visually.

Embedded Reports: Live versus Taped	
Live reports	49.1%
Live audio only	12.1
Combination	11.1
All tape	27.8
Total	100%

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[1] See "TV Combat Fatigue on the Rise; But 'Embeds' Viewed Favorably," Pew Research Center For the People and the Press, March 28, 2003. Available online at:
 http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=178.
[2] Live and unedited is defined here as live reports, live audio with b-roll tape, live phone conversations without any video, or in three cases, live reports taped and played in their entirety later.

And one in ten embedded stories studied (11%) involved some combination of live and taped elements, such as a live account from a reporter, which then moves to a taped soundbite with a soldier, and then back to the reporter live.

This reliance on live differed depending on the medium. Networks were more likely to air a fully taped package from the field, 35% versus 20% for cable.

This bears out what some news executives have suggested is a conscious attempt to play to the natural strengths of the different programs and outlets. The Los Angeles Times paraphrased Bill Wheatley, the vice president of NBC News, as explaining that "the general rule has been to offer more tightly edited packages during the evening news and news magazines with extensive live reports on cable or within morning programs such as the Today Show." Wheatley was quoted directly as saying, "I don't want to get into the trap of just showing off the technology because the viewer will quickly tire of that. I do think we need to be careful of not over doing it if there is no point to it, but so far so good."[3]

At least one prominent cable TV journalist is worried that her medium may be tilting too far in the direction of immediacy. "While the live [coverage] is exciting, it can't give you everything in a concise and broader context," Christiane Amanpour told the Los Angeles Times. "Our network has gotten away from taped packages. They think 'live' brings more spontaneity, 'keep it moving' is what they tell us."[4]

In their evening newscasts, broadcast networks tended more than others to weave embedded material into other reportage, not unlike what newspapers might do.

Take for example, ABC World News Tonight with Peter Jennings on Monday March 24. After Jennings went over the headlines, he turned to Pentagon correspondent John McWethy for a package on the war, which contained a number of video images from embedded camera people, and a pair of 10-second sound bites from embedded reporters Mike Cerre and John Berman. This was followed by a taped 25-second report from embedded reporter Bob Woodruff and a 55-second report from embedded reporter Ted Koppel.

Contrast that to how CNN's early evening newscast with Wolf Blitzer handled its embedded reports on that same night. The program used six reports from embeds that hour which averaged more than 100 seconds in length – and each report was separate and distinct, not part of a larger package.

The reliance on live also changed as time went by. On the 21st and 22nd, 57% of the embedded reports studied were live and unedited. By Monday March 24, however, live reports had dropped to less than half of all the embedded reporting studied, 47%.

Over time, the embedded reports also got shorter. More than a third of reports studied on the 21st and 22nd were 3 minutes or longer. But two days later, that had fallen to just 11% of stories.

WHAT GOT COVERED

Some observers wondered how much the embedded reporting would be about actual fighting, or whether the embedded reporters would be limited to "feel good"

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[3] See Brian Lowry and Elizabeth Jensen, "The 'Gee Whiz' War," Los Angeles Times, March 28, 2003, page E1.

[4] Lowry and Jensen

stories about troop morale, supply lines, maneuvers and preparations. Anyone who imagined the embedded reporting wouldn't focus on the actual battlefront was mistaken.

Stories about combat or its results made up 41% of all the embedded reports studied.

Cable news was even more likely than average to focus on actual combat or the results, accounting for roughly half (47%) of the embedded stories studied, compared with 35% on the broadcast networks.

Not surprisingly, the percentage of stories that focused on combat and its results rose over time. The first two days of the study, Friday March 21, as the ground forces were just beginning to move, and Saturday the 22nd, 31% of embed stories were about military action and the results of that action. By March 24, that number doubled to 61%.

The second biggest topic of the embedded stories studied was pre-combat activity, such as troop movements or military strategy. Roughly a third of the stories focused on such matters, 32%.

Topics Covered in Embedded Stories	
Military Action	27.8%
Combat Results	13.0
Pre-Combat	31.5
Personnel/Equipment	15.7
Aftermath	6.5
Other	5.5
Total	100%

Another 16% of stories focused on military issues such as troop morale, the jobs of specific soldiers, or the role of certain pieces of equipment. Seven percent of the stories considered long-term effects of the war and 6% focused primarily on other issues, including interaction with civilians and humanitarian aid.

This by no means suggests these other topics were left uncovered. Rather, this suggests that embedded reporting was the media's eye on the front line, rather than on the lives of the soldiers.

MILITARY ACTION ON CAMERA

The second question involving the access of embedded reporters concerned whether Americans would see war live and in graphic detail. Before the war began, some wondered whether, in the age of 24-hour news and satellite technology, this would be the first war we actually saw unfold in all its horror in our living rooms.

Highest Action On Camera	
Weapons Fired	21.3%
Human Impact	-
Non-human Impact	*10.2*
No Results Shown	*11.1*
Frontline at the Ready	11.1
Moving or Maneuvers	32.4
Non-Frontline Activities	10.2
Other	1.8
No Video Aspect	23.2
Total	100%

To assess this, the Project classified the pictures themselves according to how close they came to depicting frontline action. Did the visuals depict people being killed or wounded? Was there combat footage without human impact, footage of casualties after combat, or footage of activities further away from the front?

The answer, at least in the early days of the war, was that there was real action caught on camera—though this did not dominate.

In total, 21% of all embedded stories studied showed combat action—weapons being fired.

In half of these, viewers saw that firing hit non-human targets such as buildings and vehicles. In the other half, viewers could see the firing but not see whether those weapons struck a target or not.

However, none of the embedded stories studied showed footage of people, either U.S. soldiers or Iraqis, being struck, injured or killed by weapons fired.

In other words, while 41% of stories concerned combat, half as many (21%) depicted that combat visually.

In addition, the pictures were not graphic. Indeed, our subjective impression is that still photos published in newspapers were often more graphic, as were pictures on foreign television.

Beyond images of combat itself, 11% of stories showed frontline troops either preparing for combat or regrouping after combat. Some of these stories included footage of military casualties after the fact.

In 32% of stories, the most prominent footage shown was troops moving, maneuvering, or scouting.

Twenty-three percent of stories included no significant video elements, meaning that we heard only audio or saw the reporter amidst a non-descript background.

Another 10% of stories were from reporters embedded with troops not on the front line.

The level of action shown on camera rose over the three days studied. The firing of weapons appeared in 11% of stories on Friday March 21, 19% on Saturday March 22, and 36% on Monday March 24.

FACTUALNESS

A common criticism of the media culture today is that the press is too interpretative. Commentary and analysis are blended with news. Journalists flip flop in their roles between pundit and reporter. Peter Arnett in Baghdad famously crossed that line when he went on Iraqi state TV and offered his opinions on U.S. military strategy.

The reporting studied here finds that the embedded reporters, at least early on, focused heavily on facts.

Level of Reporting	
Fact	93.5%
Analysis	1.9
Opinion	0.9
Commentary	3.7
Total	100%

The study examined each embedded report for whether the assertions in the story were mostly factual, analytical, or fell into the category of opinion or commentary. Analysis was counted as any interpretative statement that was attributed to a source or some reporting. Opinion was any assertion that the reporter offered on his or her own, without referring to reporting to back it up. Commentary was description that went beyond fact-- more poetic narrative of what it felt like to be there. Each story was then tallied according to which type of reporting predominated.

The stories were overwhelmingly factual, 94%. The next closest category was commentary, stories that attempted to describe the scene with some poetic license. Accounts that were largely analysis or opinion were negligible. It would be interesting to see whether over time, particularly when action is slower and reporters have been in the field longer, these percentages change.

SOURCING

Where were viewers getting the information from in embedded stories? Overwhelmingly, it came filtered through the reporters alone. In the vast majority of stories studied (77%), reporters were the only person viewers heard from.

This was even truer on the broadcast networks, where 83% of stories featured only the reporter, compared with 71% on cable.

One reason, perhaps, is that with less time, particularly in the evening newscasts, the networks' embedded reports tended to be shorter summaries of the day's events. Interestingly, these summaries were often among the clearest to understand and provided the most context, Project analysts felt.

On cable, with more time to fill, there was a slightly greater tendency to hear from soldiers and other sources as well, in part because more of these stories touched on soldiers' reactions and feelings rather than focusing on summarizing the day's events.

Overall, the embedded reporters interviewed commissioned officers in 15% of the embedded stories. In about half that many, 8%, we heard from just enlisted personnel.

Cable was especially more likely to air stories that interviewed enlisted personnel only (7 stories in all versus 2 stories on the networks).

IMPRESSIONS: THE POTENTIAL AND RISKS OF EMBEDDING

Looking beyond the numbers, analysts at the Project reviewing the stories developed several more subjective impressions about the potentials and the risks of the embedding system. Here are some of those impressions.

Edited Taped Packages Offer the Power of Story Telling

One of the most effective reports the Project saw was a traditional taped package by Bill Neely on CNN on Monday, March 24. Here viewers benefited not only from having a reporter embedded on the battlefield. They also benefited from the reporter telling the story after the action was over, from an eloquently written script and carefully selected video images that put the battle into context. If the embedded reports are only "slices," this piece showed the power of a moment.

"Early morning and the land that the Royal Marines have taken could be a scene from World War One. Mud, barbed wire, bomb craters, and trenches – the first thing they and we do is to dig in."

Neely's was one of the few reports that included images of dead Iraqis on the battlefield, (though after the combat was over). These casualties were photographed almost poetically: a tight shot of an outstretched mud-caked hand, a boot, a helmet next to a scorched mark on the sand.

There were intricate and tragic details, such as a white flag of surrender near an Iraqi body, which Neely makes clear war planes who killed these troops could never have seen from so far above.

And viewers saw Royal Marines sifting through the remains of an Iraqi bunker, finding gas masks.

"These masks don't prove Saddam has chemical weapons, but Britain and the U.S. don't use them, so why would Saddam issue these to his troops?"

Neely concluded:

"The Iraqis were well dug in. These trenches go on for miles but their weapons were weak and these positions, dug possibly 20 years ago during the Iran-Iraq war, are no defense against far deadlier firepower…"

It's the Content, Not the Technology

Many of the stories that stood out in reviewing the reports were delivered with the least fanfare and technological flash.

Though he was not on camera, for instance, CNN viewers could hear an edge in the voice of correspondent Walter Rodgers on Tuesday, March 25, as he and the 7th Cavalry moved down a highway across the Euphrates River through a fierce sandstorm. All viewers can see is the back of a military vehicle rolling down a dusty road, but Rodgers' audio narrative is powerful:

> *"We have been under heavy fire for the past couple of miles. Mostly, a small arms fire, but the sandstorm has enabled Iraqis to come very close to the road. And if I sound a little nervous, it's because we're in a soft-skin vehicle and everybody else is in armor…."*
>
> *"If you imagine yourself standing on a football field, the sandstorm is so dense that if you were on the goal line, you probably couldn't see much beyond midfield at this point, just yellow sand everywhere…*
>
> *"It's possible for an Iraqi to creep on his belly through these alluvial fields, these agricultural fields and come within, oh, 100 yards of that vehicle…"*

On Monday March 24, correspondent John Roberts' on the CBS Evening News delivered, in effect, a radio report, using taped footage from another network and a graphic of his face on a map. But his compelling summary of the day's battle, while not entirely contradicting the official version of events, made clearer than other reporting that day the intensity and impact of the battle that was still not entirely over and that would force "significant delays" to the U.S. battle plan.

After being attacked by Iraqi troops who appeared to be surrendering but then picked up their weapons and opened fire "cutting a Marine column to pieces," Roberts reported:

> *Some Marines expressed anger today that they were waved off of any danger in An Nasiriyah, that the Army's 3rd Infantry Division had come through the city on Saturday and declared it safe….*
>
> *After 30 hours of wearying house-to-house fighting on the streets of An Nasiriyah, the Marines decided to do it their way, sending a massive column of tanks and armor north toward the city. And while the Pentagon says the Marines now control An Nasiriyah, the glow of mortars and artillery still lights up the night sky. And it has thrown a shock into the Marines who now call the area where their comrades were killed 'Mogadishu Alley'…."*

Although he is not an embedded reporter, but rather a so-called unilateral journalist, New York Times reporter John Burns' telephone reports from Baghdad on The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer and the CBS Evening News with Dan Rather also gained praise for their specificity, insight and prescience.

Production Techniques Work When Serving the Content

For most of the first Gulf War 12 years ago, the viewer's perspective tended to be either from the briefing room or the camera on the tip of a guided missile.

In this war, while some of the embedded reporting has had a "Gee Whiz" or "Boys with Toys" quality, it is also true that some of the pictures taking viewers to the battlefield have been noteworthy all on their own.

We have seen what it looks and sounds like to be on a military convoy, to be stuck in a sandstorm, and have sensed the vastness of the desert and the real meaning of hurry up and wait. We have seen what it takes to put on a chemical suit, to sweat and shiver on the same day, to sleep in the shade of a tank or the seat of an armored personnel carrier.

We also have heard soldiers reflect on what it feels like to decide whether to shoot at someone who is dressed as a civilian.

These are visual "slices" that are hard to assimilate as you see them, but become more powerful when they are catalogued together.

At times, too, the networks used some production techniques to give the isolated images more meaning. Here, again, editing, transformed elements of news into something more—journalism more as a finished product.

In one case, for instance, on Tuesday March 25, MSNBC used the time-honored technique of time lapse to explain with pictures, rather than words, what was happening on the battlefield. As a major sandstorm blew in, producers edited together several clips of on-camera "stand-ups" by correspondent David Bloom. The first scene showed Bloom standing in the morning sunlight amid armored vehicles. As the storm blew in, it became darker and darker until Bloom could be seen only with the aid of a "light stick" he held next to his face. It had taken 30 minutes for the sand storm to turn day to night in the desert. Using time lapse, MSNBC producers in Secaucus, New Jersey retold the story in about 30 seconds.

If They're Shooting at the Troops, They're Shooting at Me

One concern before the war began was that embedded reporters would inevitably become too sympathetic to the troops with whom they were traveling. Some skeptics believed this was a primary motivation on the part of military planners in designing the embedded system in the first place. Feed the media beast enough stories that cast U.S. troops in the best possible light and the job of managing the media message is all but taken care of.

The review of embedded reports shows that the inevitable bias that comes with point of view is a risk journalists and viewers must beware of.

On March 22, for instance, an embedded Oliver North reporting about helicopter attacks on enemy positions for Fox & Friends talked about a "remarkable display of military prowess and might" on the part of "my marines."

North also covered the marines aiding a wounded Iraqi teenage girl and transporting her to medical attention. "A remarkable display of humanitarianism by our armed forces as well," the Fox anchor added.

Some may question how representative North's reporting may be. North, however, is employed as a journalist by Fox News. Moreover, moments in which concerns about journalistic distance came to mind were not restricted to North.

One area of concern is whether embedded journalists, with a limited vantage point on the war and without complete control over where they go and when, are always capable of fully contextualizing the news they report.

One example was a story March 22 by NBC reporter Kerry Sanders about surrendering Iraqi POW's. Sanders reported the Iraqi soldiers were fleeing Basra. Later we would learn Basra was hardly under coalition control.

Sanders described prisoners who were kept apart from each other as being "given an opportunity to lay down separate from everybody else." As the camera panned over the prisoners, getting close in on their faces, he picked up a small packet of food an Iraqi had been eating and described it as a "humanitarian daily ration, giving them something to eat while they've been here."

The story, coming near the top of that evening's nightly newscast and described as showing "what the U.S. marines are encountering" as they move north, left the general impression of widespread surrender, all of it without violence. A day later, this sense would give way to an impression of greater than expected Iraqi resistance, which military briefers later would also take issue with.

Moreover, the report came only one day before footage from Iraqi TV of U.S. prisoners engendered harsh rebuke from U.S. military officials, though the Iraqi footage included interviews with U.S. POW's, something Sanders' story did not.

The challenges here are myriad. The embedded reporter surrounded by U.S. troops may need to be careful about adopting terminology carefully chosen by military strategists to win hearts and minds.

Indeed, some may question the propriety of two of the networks—MSNBC and Fox News—adopting "Operation Iraqi Freedom" as the slogan of their war coverage in general. Much as "Shock and Awe" was in the first days of the war, this is a phrase repeated over and over in the coverage, not by embedded reporters as much as by anchors and in the logos and graphics, especially on Fox News and MSNBC.

Even the term "embedded" has drawn criticism from some observers who wonder whether it suggests a closeness that may erode the journalist's role as fact checker and observer.

Technology for its Own Sake Is Not Enough

At times, particularly in the first couple days, some reports brought to mind the danger of becoming too infatuated with the capabilities of one's technology. NBC's David Bloom, for instance, was installed with high-quality, high-tech cameras on a tank recovery vehicle, which in turn beamed signals to a second, NBC News vehicle several miles behind. The equipment allowed Bloom to send multi-camera, high-quality pictures from closer to the front than normally would be possible. While a wonderful tool, at least one report on March 21, which went on for more than 10 minutes, focused on what Bloom and his vehicle mates were eating, having soldiers say hello to folks back home,

and how the technology worked. While understandable perhaps in the introductory days, the report showed at least one risk of embedding: if you have people out there with new technology, there is a tendency to use it regardless of the news.

The use of split screen, particularly during some embedded reports, was another risk we found, particularly on cable. For a good deal of time the morning of March 21, for instance, CNN maintained a split screen in which the larger image was an essentially unchanging camera shot of the back of a truck in the middle of a rolling military convoy.

The shot itself offered little new information, particularly after a few minutes. The result was largely confusing, as producers also tried to sandwich in reports from embedded correspondents in other places and with other video, along with the crawl and logos the network was employing. Presumably producers were enamored of having live pictures from Iraq, which anchors kept referring to as historic.

Information Overload Equals Noise

At times, the sheer velocity of information and the rush to get it on air created havoc for viewers. Consider Fox News on the morning of March 22. As they conducted a live interview with embedded reporter Greg Kelly, the anchors interrupted to introduce new footage just in of a cityscape in Iraq. The anchors announced the pictures were from Baghdad on delay. Then, moments later, announced they were actually from Umm Qasr on delay. Then, a few moments after that, announced they were live from Umm Qasr.

By then, a "super" reading "Live from Umm Qasr" went up on the screen, but it no longer mattered, since the pictures they were labeling had returned again to Kelly and his convoy somewhere in the desert.

The irony was that the new pictures, while live, conveyed nothing in particular. Such moments, while the obvious result of the difficulty of live television, become only more noticeable when we as viewers are trying to puzzle together the meaning of different slivers of embedded reporting.

The Game of Telephone

At times, as anchors tried to interpret the limited but direct information from reporters, it seemed a little like the children's game of telephone, in which a first message is translated into something even more dramatic with time.

Consider Fox News' coverage on March 22nd of the grenade attack in Camp Pennsylvania in Kuwait.

At first, reporter Doug Luzader in Kuwait quotes the Associated Press and Reuters to anchor Tony Snow that "apparently one or more terrorists infiltrated the perimeter of this camp." He went on to speculate that the incident "indicates not only are these camps somewhat vulnerable, but also the fact that they may have terrorist operatives, perhaps even coming in from Iraq over the border." However, despite his own speculation, Luzader added, "Now, there's no indication that's what happened here."

A few moments later, Snow turns to Sky News reporter Stuart Ramsay by telephone from Camp Pennsylvania itself. By now, what was only a possibility a moment ago is becoming alleged fact from Ramsay, and one or more perpetrators has become two foreign nationals.

"It seems that two Kuwaiti or Arab nationals entered the headquarters tent in Camp Pennsylvania….It seems, and this is not confirmed at the moment, that these two

foreign nationals, were possibly on the translating staff or working at the headquarters tent. Now that's not been confirmed, but it seems that they may have had a reason to be in the camp."

Then Ramsay dresses them. "These two men were apparently wearing desert camouflage gear, one apparently was wearing a helmet."

Snow then summarizes for viewers who tuned in late. "Once again, we have reports that at Camp Pennsylvania…there has been an attack, presumably by a couple of men, who were serving as translators."

Within a few hours, it would turn out, the U.S. military took a lone U.S. soldier into custody for the attack.

Obviously, one of the tensions here is trying to balance the desire of journalists to get a story out quickly and the responsibility to verify what you report. At minimum, journalists need to be careful to leave no false implications. It is best to be as clear as possible about what has been verified and what has not. The usual journalistic qualifiers, such as "indicated," "said to be" and "reportedly," may not be adequate.

Through the Soda Straw

The most common criticism of the embedded reports is that they are only isolated pieces of a larger mosaic, and that relying too heavily on them would thus skew the picture viewers get. A review of the 108 embedded stories examined here suggests that there is validity to this.

"We've never had a war like this," Nightline Executive Producer Tom Bettag told the Los Angeles Times. "We got inundated by close-ups. Somebody's got to take a step back and give a little perspective."[5]

ABC Pentagon Correspondent John McWethy was quoted in the Washington Post April 1 as saying, "Riding around in a tank is fun, but you don't know [expletive] about what's going on."[6]

Greg Mitchell, the editor of Editor and Publisher magazine, which covers the newspaper industry, on March 27 identified 15 different stories in which the media got it "wrong or misreported a sliver of fact into a major event."[7]

Many of these stories, if not all, involve the embedded reporters and their organizations trying to sift through all the reportage flowing into their news desks.

Among the stories, Mitchell cites: Saddam may have been killed the first night (March 20); even if he wasn't killed, Iraqi command and control was no doubt decapitated (March 22); Umm Qasr has been taken (March 22, March 23, March 24); most Iraqi soldiers will not fight for Saddam and instead are surrendering in droves (March 22); Iraqi citizens are greeting Americans as liberators (March 22); an entire division of 8,000 Iraqi soldiers surrendered en masse near Basra (March 23); several scud missiles have been launched against U.S. forces in Kuwait (March 23); Saddam's fednyeem militia are few in number and do not pose a serious threat (March 23); Basra

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[5] See Lowry and Jensen.

[6] See Howard Kurtz, "Away from the Battlefield, Covering the Big Guns," Washington Post, April 1, 2003, page C1.

[7] See Greg Mitchell, "15 Stories They've Already Bungled," Editor and Publisher online, March 27, 2003. Available at http://www.editorandpublisher.com/editorandpublisher/headlines/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1850208

has been taken (March 23); a captured chemical plant was likely to have produced chemical weapons (March 23); Nasiriyah has been taken (March 23); the Iraqi government faces a major rebellion of anti-Saddam citizens in Basra (March 24); a convoy of 1,000 Iraqi vehicles and Republican Guard are speeding from Baghdad to engage U.S. troops (March 25).

The challenge for news organizations and for viewers is knowing how to leaven the embedded reporting with the other information available. This, to a large degree, is what we saw the networks moving toward doing in their half-hour traditional nightly newscasts.

PBS's News Hour with Jim Lehrer was particularly effective in doing this with repeated summaries by Ray Suarez during the newscasts reminding viewers of the larger developments of the day. Nightline developed a similar feature during its newscast called "Big Picture." MSNBC has done a similar thing each half hour.

This challenge, however, is obviously far greater for the cable channels, and, in some ways, easiest for print organizations.

Indeed, in the age of the new media culture, not being on 24 hours a day is now offered as a value. ABC News began producing promotions for its evening newscast by advertising that ABC News was covering the war 24 hours a day and that viewers could get that reporting on World News Tonight in 30 minutes.

REALITY TELEVISION

When Hollywood producer Jerry Bruckheimer created a short-lived entertainment show called "Profiles from the Front Line," it suggested that war in Iraq would become the ultimate reality TV.

If so, embedded reporters might become the central characters, or at least the program hosts.

Watching the embedded reporting so far, it is becoming clear that the war is less like reality television than reality itself—confusing, incomplete, sometimes numbing, sometimes intense, and not given to simple story lines.

Live reports in particular often lacked the things that make reality television such a draw – time and editors. Reality television works because the producers who stage the shows together wait until they have hours of tape, then cull through the footage to find the plot, the critical turning points, the compelling characters. Such luxuries, and such manipulations, are missing with war.

The embedded coverage has made the war coverage richer, but also more difficult to absorb. It may be leading to more snap judgments. It also may prove much harder for military planners and message managers to contain. The battle has become more complex than computer generated maps that ex-generals can walk across.

At least in the first week, the embedded reporting seemed at times to gain context. But if these are the first days of a new kind of war, they are also the first of a new kind of war reporting, and more mistakes, and more learning from them, are inevitable.

Methodology

The study examined morning and evening newscasts on March 21, 22, and 24, 2003.

For the morning newscasts, it examined the period of 7:00 A.M. to 9:00 A.M. on each day. The specific programs studied were ABC's Good Morning America, The CBS Early Show, NBC's Today Show, CNN's American Morning, and Fox News' Fox & Friends. To remain consistent, it did not include a third hour of the Today Show or American Morning.

For the evening newscasts, the study examined the first 30 minutes of ABC World News Tonight, the CBS Evening News and the NBC Nightly News on each night. For CNN and Fox News, on Friday (March 21) and Monday (March 24), it looked at the signature pre-prime time news shows of Wolf Blitzer Reports (5:00 P.M. to 6:00 P.M) and the Fox Special Report With Brit Hume (6:00 P.M. to 7:00 P.M.). On Saturday, March 22, it examined CNN and Fox Coverage from 6:00 P.M. to 7:00 P.M.

The morning of Saturday, March 22nd, the CBS affiliate in Washington D.C. aired local news from 7 a.m. to 8 a.m. and CBS network news from 8 a.m. to 9 a.m. The local news was not included in the study. Also on Saturday, due to the NCAA Basketball Tournament, which aired on CBS, the CBS Evening News was abbreviated to an update totaling 2 minutes and 30 seconds. The study included that update, which contained one embedded report**,** in our study.

All broadcasts were monitored from videotaped segments of the programs as they aired in the Washington, D.C. market.

Story Selection

Within the hours selected, the study examined all stories from embedded reporters that were 20 seconds or longer. Embedded reports were identified through the station's own on-air identification and secondarily through a list published by the Washington Post, "The Network's Heavy Artillery: Who'll Win the Battles of Tag Lines & Toys," John Maynard, March 21, 2003.

CBS reporter Lee Cowan was not officially categorized by the military or CBS as "embedded." But in two stories, he temporarily attached himself with a unit and produced pieces so similar in nature to other embedded pieces that these pieces were included.

This resulted in a project universe of 108 stories, all of which were fully coded and are included in the final data analysis.

Coding Process

A team of four researchers worked with a detailed, standardized codebook. Each

broadcast was initially screened and pre-coded by a single coder. The pre-coding process confirmed whether a story was embedded or not. For embedded stories, the date, outlet and timeslots were determined. Next, stories were fully coded by a single coder via multiple story viewings. All stories were coded for the following variables:

- **Live Versus Taped:** Whether the report was completely live, had some editing or was fully taped.
- **Place of Origin:** The country from which the reporter filed his or her report. Embedded reporters on ships were noted as being at sea.
- **Topic:** The topic that received the most seconds of coverage in the story. If two topics received equal attention, coders deferred to the lead topic.
- **Source of information:** This is a hierarchy variable that captured the highest authority used as an *on camera* source within a story.
- **On Camera Action:** This is a hierarchy variable that captured how close the story's visual images came to depicting front line of action.
- **Level of Reporting:** This indicates whether a story is mainly fact, analysis, opinion, or color commentary by tallying the total number of statements for each category, and seeing which category predominated for that story. If two types of statements received equal number of tallies, coders deferred to the lead statement.
- **Length in seconds:** This variable captured the total length of a story, rounded to the nearest five seconds. Lead-ins were not included.

Researchers analyzed each news story in its entirety, working through the sequential variables. Project Rules for Coders were established prior to beginning that process, and were applied during all phases of coding. Intercoder reliability was established by training and testing the group beforehand. A series of test stories were fully coded by each member of the coding team and then results were compared until the team was coding each variable identically. In addition, all subjective variables were reviewed and confirmed by a senior manager. No systematic errors were discovered.

Topline

	TOTAL N=108	Outlet		Date	
		Network N=57	Cable N=51	21&22 Mar N=72	24-Mar N=36
DATE					
March 21st	41.7%	42.1%	41.2%	62.5%	-
March 22nd	25.0	24.6	25.5	37.5	-
March 24th	33.3	33.3	33.3	-	100%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
LIVE V TAPE					
Live report	49.1%	43.9%	54.9%	57.0%	33.3%
Live phone	12.0	10.5	13.7	8.3	13.9
Combo	11.1	10.5	11.8	23.6	16.7
All tape	27.8	35.1	19.6	11.1	36.1
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
ORIGIN					
Iraq	71.3%	77.2%	64.7%	59.7%	94.4%
Kuwait	21.3	19.3	23.5	30.6	2.8
Other ME	1.8	-	3.9	2.8	-
At Sea	5.6	3.5	7.9	6.9	2.8
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
TOPIC					
Mil. Action	27.8%	22.8%	33.3%	15.3%	52.8%
Same-day results	13.0	12.2	13.7	15.3	8.3
Pre-combat	31.5	38.6	23.5	43.0	8.3
Personnel/equip	15.7	15.8	15.7	16.7	13.9
Aftermath	6.5	5.3	7.9	6.9	5.6
Other	5.5	5.3	5.9	2.8	11.1
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
TOP SOURCE					
Mil. Commissioned	14.8%	14.0%	15.7%	15.3%	13.9%
Other Military	8.3	3.5	13.7	8.3	8.3
Reporter Only	76.9	82.5	70.6	76.4	77.8
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Continued

	TOTAL N=108	Outlet		Date	
		Network N=57	Cable N=51	21&22 Mar N=72	24-Mar N=36
CLOSEST VIDEO					
Weapons Fired	21.3%	19.3%	23.5%	13.9%	36.1%
human impact	-	-	-	-	-
non-human impact	*10.2*	*10.5*	*9.8*	*8.3*	*13.9*
no results	*11.1*	*8.8*	*13.7*	*5.6*	*22.2*
Front-line ready	11.1	12.3	9.8	9.7	13.9
Moving/Maneuvers	32.4	38.6	25.5	38.9	19.4
Non front line	10.2	10.5	9.8	12.5	5.6
Other	1.8	3.5	-	2.8	-
No Video aspect	23.2	15.8	31.4	22.2	25.0
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
REPORTING					
Fact	93.5%	91.2%	96.1%	93.1%	94.4%
Analysis	1.9	3.5	-	1.4	2.8
Opinion	0.9	1.8	-	-	2.8
Commentary	3.7	3.5	3.9	5.5	-
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
LENGTH					
Under 1 minute	8.3%	12.3%	3.9%	6.9%	11.1%
1 minute	35.2	42.1	27.5	30.6	44.5
2 minutes	29.7	33.3	25.5	27.8	33.3
3 minutes	11.1	7.0	15.7	15.3	2.8
4 minutes	8.3	3.5	13.7	8.3	8.3
5+ minutes	7.4	1.8	13.7	11.1	-
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%