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Hidden Ties that Bind

The Psychological Bonds of Embedding Have Changed the Very Nature of War Reporting

Sherry Wasilow

Introduction

While embedded reporting has been allowed entry into the ongoing chess game between the military and the media, it is not apparent that the psychological nuances of its origins and impact on storytelling have been fully explored. Yet its adoption as a viable option in war reporting has led to a *de facto* division of journalistic framing. Embedding reporters with troops has led to a micro focus on soldiers and the minutiae of conflict, while traditional or unilateral reporting continues to provide contextual perspective on the purpose and impact of the fighting within a bigger picture. I will argue that this division needs to be bridged.

Examining the psychology of embedding must be preceded by examining its history. Neither military/media tension nor embedding are new. Some researchers such as Michael Pfau et al. (2005), a professor at the University of Oklahoma, have traced the relationship between the press and the military as far back as the American Civil War. But the contentiousness of that relationship became most apparent during and subsequent to the Vietnam War.

Likewise, modern versions of embedding existed before its large-scale and better-known implementation during the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Britain had successfully implemented embedding during the 1982 Falklands War against Argentina. The implementation was so successful that an Australian Foreign Affairs Brief linked journalists' development of "feelings of camaraderie" with favorable news coverage of British forces during the Falklands campaign (Miskin, Rayner, & Lalic 2003, p. 2). Embedding was also used on a limited scale for U.S. military deployments in Bosnia (1992 through to 1995) and Kosovo (during 1999). Its success, according to Cortell, Eisinger,

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& Althaus (2009), produced an expectation by news bureau chiefs that some form of an embedding program would be devised for the next military campaign. The program *was* developed, eventually, but not as smoothly and certainly not as quickly as desired.

Several factors were involved. First and foremost, two strong personalities: Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and his assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, Victoria Clarke, who is widely credited by both scholars and journalists with designing the nuts and bolts of the embedding program.[1]Behind the scenes, as revealed in a 2008 *New York Times* article by David Barstow, "Behind Analysts, the Pentagon's Hidden Hand," embedding news media with U.S. troops was just part one of Pentagon strategy; part two was embedding hand-picked retired military officers as "message force multipliers" (p. 1) into TV media to help shape public opinion without making viewers aware of their administration connections. Even before Sept. 11, according to documents gained through a two-year battle with the Pentagon, Clarke built a system to recruit "key influentials" (Barstow, 2008, p. 3) - movers and shakers that included war heroes, military strategists and advocates, and defense-industry contractors and lobbyists - who could be counted on to generate support for Rumsfeld's priorities.

1. Before joining the Pentagon, Clarke was a manager in Washington for Hill & Knowlton, an international public-relations and marketing firm, and also served as press secretary for the re-election campaign of President George Herbert Walker Bush in 1992. Clarke left the Pentagon in 2003, joining CNN as a political and policy analyst, then Comcast Corporation and, most recently, ABC as an on-air consultant and news analyst.

Another factor involved media pressure. Initially, the United States Department of Defense (DoD) (2001) perceived the embedding process as inferior to press pools, which were the government's preferred mechanism at the outset of the Afghanistan conflict. According to 2001 DoD documents, in a briefing on 30 September 2001, bureau chiefs clearly reiterated their desire for embedding with U.S. troops, yet Clarke was noncommittal. On 5 December 2001, Marines confined pool reporters and photographers in a warehouse to prevent them from covering the return of wounded U.S. soldiers, prompting outrage from the press corps, followed by a written apology from the DoD. Bureau chiefs then persuaded the DoD to use embedding for the Iraq conflict.

Moreover, another factor was the growing realization that advances in communication technology, particularly portable satellite-transmitting devices, reduced military ability to control the dissemination of information from the battlefield. Approximately 1,000 foreign and domestic media representatives were planning to cover the conflict independently or *unilaterally*. These *unilaterals* made their own arrangements for entering Afghanistan and its neighboring states, often reporting on the war with the assistance of Northern Alliance troops. In short, attempts to strictly control media access to the front lines did not in fact limit the media's ability to disseminate information about

U.S. military actions, some of which clearly questioned military claims.

Switching Gears

What happened next? As part of Operation Iraqi Freedom (which began in the year 2003), more than 600 U.S. and foreign journalists were embedded with and reported from infantry positions, aircraft carriers, Special Forces units, and Marine divisions. Media boot camps were provided for the purposes of acclimatization. Consequently, U.S. military/media relations shifted dramatically. Not only were military and media representatives working jointly to implement the embedding program, but much of the post-Vietnam hostility that had come to characterize the relationship between these two institutions seemed to have dissipated. In its place were the makings of new psychological ties between reporters and soldiers, which had an impact on subsequent reporting.

Social penetration theory is a fancy way of describing how human relationships develop. As people get to know each other better, communication shifts from the superficial or party chatter to more personal topics, slowly moving beyond public personas. More contact leads to communication with greater breadth and depth, which in time facilitates more intensity and intimacy. Normally this process takes time, but can fast track in *hot conditions* – when uncertainty levels are high and circumstances are dangerous – which is typical in combat. These conditions can lead to accelerated bonding, or what behavioral scientist Wayne Hensley (1996) has called *swift trust*. This in turn can bias people's perceptions, an important consideration in the case of embedded journalists who are essentially reporting on a unit while in a *crisis-de-jour* environment.

Pfau et al. contend, referencing a 2004 piece by writer Brent Cunningham in the Columbia Journalism Review, that this "bonding" can also serve to bridge a "class divide" that would otherwise separate journalists who "are part of the professional class, reasonably affluent and well educated" from enlisted military personnel, who embody a more "working-class" mentality (2005, p. 470).

The drive to belong to a larger, encompassing group can also promote *enculturation*, which refers to a person's acceptance of a given organization's culture and values. As commitment to any organization – whether religious, academic, work-related, or social – grows, people internalize attitudes and

adopt behaviors that tie them to the group. While enculturation occurs in all organizations, military-culture researcher Joseph Soeters (2000) notes that its effects are especially magnified in combat conditions, when "there is a strong need for a so-called collective mind" (p. 475). Practically speaking, the survival of the individual journalist within the combat unit depends on the adoption of collective and even seamless behaviour. Furthermore, just like in the case of swift trust, enculturation is accelerated in "hot conditions" (Pfau et al., 2005, p. 471) such as combat when – by design as well as necessity – embedded journalists and military personnel eat, drink, and ponder their mortality together.

Embedding Induces Internal Framing

How might these psychological bonds affect news reports, even by seasoned journalists who consider themselves too cynical to be swayed? One place to start is with the idea of framing.

Framing is about packaging; for journalists, it's about how they choose to select, emphasize, interpret, and exclude aspects of a perceived reality. These choices have clear implications for, or framing effects on, the way an audience perceives, interprets and reacts to news stories. Framing does not have to be an obvious activity; in fact, one could argue that framing is more powerful in the form of subtle alterations to the properties of any particular news narrative: keywords, metaphors, concepts, symbols, and visual images that are chosen as components of a news narrative.

In his 1991 seminal study on U.S. coverage of international news, Robert Entman wrote that frames are intrinsic to a news report: "Frames reside in the specific properties of the news narrative that encourage those perceiving and thinking about events to develop particular understandings of them" (p. 7). What this means in practical terms is that, because embeds and unilaterals cover different aspects of the war, it is only natural that they frame the conflict differently.

Embedded journalists are attached to specific units in order to provide an intense and intimate snapshot of war. Due to their focus on the minutia, individual soldiers, and in-depth coverage of their assigned unit, however, they are unable to provide a broad overarching view of military operations or a historical, political and/or social context to the war. Unilaterals, on the other hand, have less access to battle but generally more access to what happens

outside of and after the fighting, such as citizens' reactions. In short, embeds have an insider's or participant observer's perspective while unilaterals have an outsider's or more traditional perspective.

In a 2007 study by Shahira Fahmy and Thomas J. Johnson of embedded versus unilateral perspectives on the Iraq War, respondents confirmed that different types of access resulted in different types of stories. Embeds explained that because they had more access to the troops they wrote primarily about the war and U.S. soldiers; unilaterals wrote mostly about Iraqi civilians wounded and killed, as well as their reception and perception of the U.S. military.

American embedded journalist Gordon Dillow (cited in Fahmy & Johnson, 2005) admitted: "I found myself falling in love with my subject. I fell in love with 'my' marines. Maybe it's understandable. When you live with the same guys for weeks, sharing their dreams and miseries, learning about their wives and girlfriends, their hopes and dreams, admiring their physical courage and strength, you start to make friends—closer friends in some ways than you'll ever have outside of war. Isolated from everyone else, you start to see your small corner of the world the same way they do" (p. 303).

Embeds themselves are quite aware that unilaterals' stories are generally more critical and more sympathetic to the Iraqi civilians on the ground. One reporter responded anonymously (Fahmy & Johnson, 2007) that: "[The unilaterals] were able to convey the human tragedy element far more accurately. They did not have any pressures to send a story which would not be well accepted by or give 'bad publicity' to troops which they were sharing intimate time and space with over the weeks of the war" (p. 108).

Consequently, embedded reports – from the Iraq War, for example – have been more positive toward the military than traditional news reports through textual and visual structures framed from the reporter's perspective. Textual structures often used in embedded reporting, for example – *I, we*, and *us* – include both the reporter and the viewer in the unfolding events. Conversely, traditional reporting generally uses third-person language – h*e*, *she*, *they*, and *them* – which underscores the distance between the viewer and the event (Casper & Child, 1994).

There have been a handful of content analyses of embedded coverage.

Two looked at U.S. print and television coverage of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) in 2003 (Pfau et al., 2005; Pfau et al. 2004), finding that embedded reporting provided positive relational cues through interviews with military personnel. Another two looked at British television coverage of OIF (Lewis, et al., 2004; Lewis & Brookes, 2004), finding a heavy focus on specific combat missions as opposed to broader issues; as well as the coverage being more favourable towards the government's position on the war, and twice as likely to represent the Iraqi people as welcoming the invasion rather than being suspicious, reserved, or even hostile.

Whither Embedding?

At this point, we need to ask ourselves two related questions. One, is the development of an apparent divide between embedded and unilateral framing of storytelling a negative thing? Two, is there such a thing as journalistic *objectivity* in the first place? These are both important questions to ask, given that the embedding program so strongly implemented in 2003 in Iraq has now become standard practice in Afghanistan in 2011 and will likely continue for the foreseeable future.

Second question first: is it realistic to expect a journalist to objectively tell every aspect of any given story? This isn't a new question, by any means, and it's a personal decision that every journalist must make in their reporting: pursuing the ideal of objectivity, or pursuing the more mundane notions of perspective, balance, and/or fairness. This writer well remembers the early days of sleep-deprived, coffee-fuelled, deadline-driven journalism school … and a belief in objectivity. Today it seems more likely – as Molly Ivins, the Ivy League-educated Texas journalist known for her intelligence, corn-pone witticism, and withering reporting on the rough-and-tumble Texas Legislature asserted in *Molly Ivins: A Rebel Life* – "ultimate objectivity [is] bullshit" (Minutaglio & Smith 2009, p. 215). Especially in a war-torn environment. The psychological risks of what Bryan Whitman, U.S. deputy assistant secretary of defense for public affairs/media operations (2002 - 2010) called "living, eating, moving, in combat with the unit that [the journalist is] attached to" (U.S. DoD, 2003) was also noted by several anonymous reporters in the Fahmy & Johnson (2007) study: "Embedded journalists lost their objective angle towards the war. After a time of living with soldiers, they developed bonds with their units. When a unit was fired upon, the story said: 'We were fired upon' instead of 'unit X was fired upon.' In battle the journalist hoped

for the victory of his unit because his own life and safety relied on it" (p. 108).

Indeed, there are very real physical safety issues for both embeds and unilaterals, such as improvised explosive devices, kidnappings, and other manifestations of hostility. Although safety for embeds is never guaranteed. On 30 December 2009, for example, Calgary Herald reporter Michelle Lang was killing by a roadside bomb while travelling with Canadian soldiers in the southern province of Kandahar (CBC, 2009).

The next question concerns the apparent divide between embedded and unilateral framing of new stories. Some reporters have served as both embeds and unilaterals. Does that indicate that embedding reporting is just another tool in a journalist's kit of tricks and options? On 8 June 2006, Sheppard (in the *Globe and Mail*) published a question & answer session with several of the paper's reporters about their experiences as embedded journalists with the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan, using reader questions.

Globe Beijing Bureau Chief Geoffrey York, a graduate of Carleton University and *Globe* reporter since 1981, was one of the respondents. York has covered war zones since 1991 in places such as Somalia, Sudan, Chechnya, Iraq, the Balkans, and the Palestinian Territories. He had also just finished a one-month embedded stint in Afghanistan, his fourth visit to Afghanistan since 2001. York contends that an independent-minded reporter can always find ways to remain independent, regardless of the pressures or sympathies. Nor does a month on a military base force a reporter to become a pro-military cheerleader. "Why would a journalist suddenly forget everything he or she learned about journalism within a few days of arriving at a military base?" he asked. "We have our standards, our experience, our training and our pride, and we don't throw those away easily."

York's view was supported by David Harmes, a Canadian military officer and media scholar (personal communication, November 21, 2010). Harmes worked with a number of different journalists – both embeds and unilaterals – as part of his duties in Afghanistan during 2003 - 2004. "The main thing I learned … was that not all journalists are created equal," he told this writer. "Embedding is less of a problem than inexperience. Seasoned 'journos' who are embedded seem to find ways to overcome some of the inherent problems. Inexperienced journos seem to be unaware of them." Attempts to manipulate information gathering and dissemination are nothing new. As York observed, "governments everywhere in the world will always try to spin the story to

their own advantage … [so do] businesses and citizen groups. Everyone tries to control the message. But journalists learn to resist those pressures, and we have many ways of getting the truth without being manipulated" (Sheppard, 2006).

Nevertheless, the business side of journalism cannot be overlooked either. While different governments and their militaries obviously benefit from embedding, concurred Harmes (personal communication, November 21, 2010), there are also political and economic benefits to news organizations that facilitate embedding in exchange for inexpensive content. "Foreign correspondence is costly and embedding is an inexpensive way to cover such a complex story," Harmes said.

To summarize then: if embedded reporting is seemingly here to stay, can be a valuable tool of the trade for journalists, and is facilitated by the military and supported by news organizations, perhaps the best option for providing comprehensive coverage (and silencing critics) is to combine the embedded and the more traditional unilateral approaches to reporting news. Perhaps unification of the psychologically myopic view of the embeds, and its emphasis on the human face of soldiers risking their lives for their countries, with the larger perspective of unilaterals, and its emphasis on the human face of everyday citizens, could best represent the complex whole. In this regard, one could posit that embedded reporting – despite the intentions behind its genesis – has given us a gift of insight, a dimension to reporting that was previously lacking.

Two recent documentary accounts of the war in Afghanistan – one is American, the other Canadian –can illustrate the potential of this approach. These two raw accounts – while lacking the production smoothness of HBO's *Generation Kill*, based on the writings of Rolling Stone journalist Evan Wright, and *The Hurt Locker*, winner of the 2010 Academy Award for Best Picture – help the viewer tap into the reality of a complex war.

Restrepo: Afghan Outpost is a 93-minute documentary that had its TV premiere on 29 November 2010 on the National Geographic channel, was voted Best Documentary at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival, and was shortlisted for a Documentary Feature Oscar at the 2011 Oscars. Made by embedded journalists Tim Hetherington and Sebastian Junger, *Restrepo* chronicles the deployment of a 15-man platoon of U.S. soldiers to Afghanistan's dangerous Korengal Valley in 2007 and 2008. The outpost, and hence the title of the documentary, was named after a platoon medic who was killed in action in a

conflict in Libya.[2]

Restrepo is an exercise in *cinéma vérité*: the cameras never leave the soldiers, channeling their loneliness, deprivation, boredom, strain of constant threat of attack, then attack, and there are no interviews with generals or politicians. The documentary is guts-grabbing powerful *because* of its unvarnished close-ups of the visceral sounds and sights of combat, and subsequent interviews conducted with the soldiers three months after deployment, when many were suffering from post-traumatic stress. This was a conscious choice on the part of its creators, one of whom told Associated Press that the power of the interviews come from the close ties that developed during combat and filming. "We were friends," said Hetherington. "We turned up not as military authority figures, not as the company shrink, but as friends who'd been through these experiences and, therefore, they opened up in a way that was pretty profound." While emotionally poignant, *Restrepo* is also notable for a lack of perspective on the larger war.

A completely different approach was taken in *Afghanistan: Outside the Wire,* a one-hour documentary that was first broadcast 21 November 2010 on Canada's Cable Public Affairs Channel (CPAC). Made by unilateral journalist Scott Taylor, who had travelled to Afghanistan five times during the last three years, often alone and always without military protection, *Outside the Wire* is an exploration of Afghan life outside of the heavily fortified Canadian base at Kandahar Airfield. Given that most Canadian journalists also operate from the airfield, the title of the documentary is a salute to the dangers, complexities and benefits of venturing outside the airfield or wire to expand on the coverage that Canadians usually receive from Afghanistan.

While *Restrepo* is gripping on an emotional level, *Outside the Wire* is challenging on a cognitive level. It's enough to make your head hurt: the complexities of a country with a history of strife dating back to Alexander the Great, extreme poverty, shady political manoeuvring, corruption at the highest levels, an illicit drug trade, ethnic and tribal factions, warlord brutality, lack of access to education, employment and equality for women. Taylor goes beyond NATO troop activity and ramp ceremonies for fallen soldiers to speak face-to-face with tribal elders, warlords, would-be suicide bombers, local politicians, aid workers, foreign diplomats, but no soldiers. Taylor tries to let his interviews tell the story, but when present, his narrative is calm and full of facts and explanation. He is attempting, he contends, to expand coverage on Afghanistan beyond what he calls "far too narrow a sliver for us to base any kind of decisions" on the mission.

2. Hetherington and several colleagues were killed on 20 April 2011 by mortar shells fired by forces loyal to Muammar Gaddafi during the 2011 Libyan civil war.

Two different framing approaches to the war in Afghanistan, two different reactions. *Restrepo* invokes visceral feelings of fear and camaraderie with soldiers whose humanity is front and centre; *Outside the Wire* engages the viewer on an intellectual conversation about a complicated history, numerous contributing issues, and future prospects. *Restrepo* unabashedly appeals to the viewer's emotions; *Outside the Wire* figuratively smacks the viewer on the head and implores them to think harder. *Restrepo* is emotionally intense but less exhausting to cognitively process than the Canadian documentary; *Outside the Wire* implores the viewer to become involved by becoming better informed, and is more cerebrally demanding of the viewer than the American documentary. *Restrepo*, representing the latest manifestation of conflict reporting, could also be said to belong to what can be called a new genre of reporting: information sharing in Sensurround.

In *What is Happening to News*, Jack Fuller, a Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist and editor, posits that evolutionary changes in our brain's wiring have led to a greater need for *emotional heat*. In other words, our ancestral wiring for survival – also known as the fight-or-flight response – has predisposed us to deal with our distracting and information-overloaded environment by focusing on sensationalism and drama, which often means tuning out the staid, objective voice of traditional journalism. What Lippmann wrote almost 90 years ago in *Public Opinion* has become magnified to a level impossible to foresee: "If the beat of a metronome will depress intelligence [referring to a psychological experiment], what do eight or twelve hours of noise, odor, and heat in a factory, or day upon day among chattering typewriters and telephone bells and slamming doors, do to the political judgments formed on the basis of newspapers read in streetcars and subways?" (1922, p. 73).

Conclusion

What concerns both Lippmann and Fuller – almost 100 years apart – is that the information overload of contemporary life has created such a barrage upon our senses that we have become stymied by multiple and simultaneous demands on our emotions and brains from carrying out rational processing and discussion of information. Yet acknowledging this new information environment, and audience reaction to it, allows us – at least as far as journalism is concerned –to think about adaptation to it. Fuller calls for both a re-examination of what is news and a more emotionally rich approach to coverage. This brings us back to embedded reporting, and how it can contribute to the bigger picture.

Notwithstanding one's position – supportive or suspicious – regarding embedded reporting, its origins, and its psychological underpinnings and intent, it would be difficult to deny that its *de facto* adoption has fundamentally changed the nature of war reporting. The question now concerns the impact and the benefits that the resulting personalization and emotional heat of this type of war reporting, as well as the schism in framing that has developed between embedded and unilateral journalism, can have on informing the public about war. In the case of Afghanistan, a war is that is taking away a public's sons and daughters into military service, sometimes permanently, draining its financial coffers, and simultaneously altering the world's geopolitical landscape. Perhaps the time has come to consciously try to reduce the schism between embedded and unilateral approaches to war reporting, to recognize the benefits of both journalistic id *and* ego. Given that the function of journalism in a democracy is to share information with a public so that it can then make informed decisions, and given the interconnectedness of a world that will no longer allow us to ignore the repercussions of a war on the other side of the planet, this is no small matter.

Author

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