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Technology, News and National Security: The Media's Increasing Capability to Cover War

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The victorious conclusion of the Persian Gulf War demonstrated not only US military prowess, but also the ability of the US government to handle coverage of the conflict by American news media.

However, the Persian Gulf War also demonstrated the extent to which the press, through technological innovation, has become a major communications link in wartime and a major threat to governmental control of information flow. Moreover, this conflict presaged the press' future capability to affect the conduct of war through competition with government over the flow of military-related information.

Essentially, the news media today, due to increased technological capability, have created a dilemma for policymakers by pitting the rights of free press and public knowledge of governmental activity against the imperatives of national security. This article will examine the technological innovations which have enhanced the newsgathering role of the press and challenged governments' oligopoly of information. It will also assess the effect of these developments on military-press relations during a time of war.

NEW TECHNOLOGY AND WAR REPORTING

Several new technologies have increased the news media's capability to gather and report news. These technologies have reshaped the newsgathering process, especially in wartime, by enhancing the press' capability to gather and report stories comprehensively and rapidly without technological reliance on non-media sources, particularly government.
BROADCAST SATELLITES

The most dramatic has been the development of the satellite. Broadcast satellites were used by the press during the Vietnam War. However, at that time there was some delay and great expense in the transmission of pictures from the war zone back to the US. Film shot in Vietnam first had to be flown to Tokyo, Hong Kong, or Bangkok for processing and then relayed via satellite back to the United States. The excessive costs for transmission—around $4,000 for ten minutes—guaranteed only those stories of major significance would be sent via satellite. 

Today, the costs for satellite transmission have diminished—current rates are as low as $1,000 per hour. Uplinks now are mobile, making transmissions possible from any part of the globe. This technological innovation allows the television news audience to see live reports from practically anywhere. Due to mobile uplinks and satellite transmissions, during the Gulf War, Americans were able to watch in their living rooms as Scud missiles landed in Riyadh and Tel Aviv.

Broadcast satellites have eliminated the time lag between the occurrence of an event and the news reporting of it. With this technology, developments in a war can be viewed live via satellite as they happen.

REMOTE-SENSING SATELLITES

However, another type of satellite—the remote sensing satellite—has also affected newsgathering in wartime and possesses even greater potential to affect government’s information control. Remote-sensing satellites are the descendants of various forms of aerial reconnaissance used since World War II for military purposes. In 1972, this technology became available for commercial uses when the US government privatized its non-military satellite system, which became known as Landsat. Today, remote sensing satellites are used for a variety of commercial and public purposes including weather forecasting, forestry, and land usage.
But the news media have also seen their value for newsgathering, especially to cover military operations to which the press has been denied access on the ground. Through remote-sensing imagery, news organizations could follow military maneuvers on the ground without actually having to be in the war zone. They could independently assess governmental claims and acquire knowledge of preparation for attacks by either side before they were announced.

Despite this potential, there has been only limited use of remote-sensing imagery for newsgathering. The technology has just recently achieved commercial satellite resolution conducive to the visual detail of broadcast television. However, a major barrier for broadcast news organizations is unlimited access to the imagery. No news media organization or group of organizations now owns a remote sensing satellite. In order to do so, they must obtain a license from the US government, which is unlikely to grant it.

Such a license probably would not be granted due to provisions in the Landsat Act of 1984 passed to establish legal guidelines for usage of remote-sensing satellites. The act allows the government to ban dissemination of information obtained from remote-sensing imagery that it perceives as harmful to national security or the international obligations of the US. Under the provisions of the act, even if a news organization received such a license, the Secretary of Commerce is authorized to revoke it at any time or impose civil penalties for non-compliance. Since news organizations possessing such imagery would use it to independently assess military efforts and report on them, the government would likely see that as harmful to national security and international obligations.

However, some news organizations have bought photographs taken by remote-sensing satellite cameras owned by non-media organizations. These have resulted in dramatic disclosures previously not publicly admitted by governments. For example, American broadcast networks received pictures, taken from a Swedish commercial remote-sensing satellite, of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in 1986, which revealed the full extent of the
reactor damage. The Soviet government was forced to admit the extent of the catastrophe after the imagery provided by the Swedish satellite was disseminated worldwide. Another such incident occurred two years later when imagery from the same satellite made two other discoveries—the previously secret location in Saudi Arabia of intermediate range missiles purchased from the Chinese government and the location of a 1957 nuclear disaster in the Soviet Union never admitted by the Soviet government.

But the first real test of this capability during an active military conflict war at the time of the Persian Gulf War. In October 1990, ABC News bought imagery from a Soviet satellite company, but was fearful of using it because of what it showed, or rather did not show. The imagery clearly revealed the huge allied troop deployment in northern Saudi Arabia. But, significantly, ABC News and the imagery experts it recruited to examine the images found no evidence of any large-scale buildup of Iraqi forces in Kuwait. This was a direct contradiction of US government assertions. Rather than display these photographs on network television and risk incurring the wrath of the Bush administration and the network’s own credibility if they were wrong, an ABC News producer leaked their dilemma to Newsweek, which ran a short story about it.

One cause of the discrepancy was the placement of Iraqi forces in concealed bunkers. But another more serious one was the low resolution of the photographs. While the Soviet commercial satellite could see objects as small as 5 meters wide, such as individual houses, US military remote sensing satellites have much better resolution.

As the commercial technology improves, the difference between military and commercial capability eventually will disappear. However, whether an American satellite with a lower resolution will ever be licensed is problematic.

One limitation had been meter resolution. Reportedly, a classified executive order signed in the late 1970s established 10 meters as the highest possible resolution for commercial satellites licensed in the US. However, in 1987, the Reagan administration
rescinded such a restriction and settled on one to two meters as the limit for national security concerns. The more liberal limitation will facilitate proliferation of high resolution imagery for news gathering purposes by American news organizations. The remote-sensing satellite is a technology with potentially large-scale impact on newsgathering and reporting in a wartime setting. With construction and deployment of such satellites by other governments as well as non-governmental organizations, within a decade US government control of the technology will be non-existent.

OTHER TECHNOLOGY

In addition to broadcast and remote-sensing satellites, the media have acquired other technological capabilities such as lighter, more portable equipment. Minicams and the downsizing of camera equipment have facilitated high portability for news crews. They have also contributed to a reduction in the size of a camera crew from three technicians in the 1950s to two or even one technician today. Such reduction greatly enhances mobility for the reporter. For print journalists, fax machines and laptop computers have increased mobility and accelerated the news reporting process.

Such technological innovations mean journalists can arrive in a war zone sooner with less technical support and file stories faster than ever before.

EFFECTS ON THE MILITARY-PRESS RELATIONSHIP

These developments—increased autonomy and technological capabilities—have had their impact on the relationship between the military and the press in wartime. Several problems have arisen due to the presence of the press and the military’s concern about its portrayal.
One of the thorniest issues is the problem of press access to the battlefield. Journalists naturally want to observe the action firsthand to assure the credibility of military reports. However, the growth in size of the journalist corps covering wars has created major logistical problems for the Defense Department.

This growth has been facilitated not only by the proliferation of professional newsgathering organizations worldwide, but also by the news media’s propensity to achieve greater autonomy from non-press sources, as well as from each other. Thus, each major news organization, and many not so major ones, send their own reporters, photographers, and technicians to cover the story. During the Persian Gulf conflict, the military public relations office facilitated access not only for ABC, NBC, and CBS, but also WABC, WNBC, and WCBS and a host of other regional and local newspapers, radio stations, television stations, and wire services. Add to that news organizations from other countries and the problem of logistics in handling the press becomes enormous.

The logistical problem was demonstrated in broadcast news coverage of the marine landing on the beaches of Somalia in December 1992. The lights of the camera crews representing a host of Western broadcast news organizations nearly blinded the marines and contributed to the appearance of a Hollywood set rather than a supposedly secret military operation.

Some of the reluctance of the Reagan administration to allow reporters onto the island nation of Grenada with the first wave of troops in 1983 can be attributed to the enormity of the press corps. An estimated 400 members of the press sought to cover the invasion the first day. That was approximately one quarter the number of the first wave of US troops. Within several days, about 750 journalists were on the island. That number exceeded the size of the press corps during the Vietnam War and constituted seventen-ths of one percent of the entire population of the country.

Field officers have complained they cannot conduct a war with that many journalists on the battlefield. They argue that the effort to keep track of that many noncombatants detracts from the
conduct of the military operations. Moreover, since most of these noncombatants are Americans, they feel a duty to protect them, which presents an additional task for ground forces. They also contend even the movement of such a large expeditionary force of journalists robs the military of valuable transportation assets—trucks, planes, helicopters—at a crucial period.11

Journalists respond that they are performing a crucial function in American democracy—playing watchdog over governmental activity. Their job is to serve as the eyes and ears of a public unable to be there personally. When government withholds access to the press, journalists view it as an attempt to bar the American public from seeing what government is doing. In his criticism of the military’s handling of the press in Grenada, NBC News commentator John Chancellor reflected this view when he remarked: “The American government is doing whatever it wants to, without any representative of the American public watching.”12

The problem of controlling access has become even more complicated with the newsgathering uses of remote-sensing satellites. With the purchase of remote-sensing imagery from commercial satellites, news organizations can view the progress of a military operation while still being denied access on the ground.

The actual usage of this technology to follow events in real-time may seem futuristic, but such capability is not far in the future for civilian satellite systems. By the mid-1990s, Landsat imagery for use by news organizations could have a processing time of only a few hours, which would allow near real-time capability. Moreover, the satellite will be re-directable in a short period of time, enhancing the ability of the press to move over a military action within a matter of hours.13 Those satellites will be limited to daytime observation without much cloud cover. However, over time even those impediments will probably be overcome as the commercial remote-sensing capability catches up with that of the current US military satellites.

In response, under the Landsat Act of 1984, the Secretary of Commerce may threaten to revoke licenses or impose civil pen-
alties on US-based firms that sell such imagery to the news media. Such a threat would likely stop EOSAT, the owner of the Landsat satellite, from selling to the press.

But American news media organizations, can still turn to non-US satellite companies, such as ABC did in the fall of 1990. With the proliferation of satellite firms during the next several years in countries such as Japan, India, Canada, and Brazil, access to imagery from abroad will be even easier and cheaper.¹⁴

The Defense Department may respond by placing a regulatory ban on publication or broadcast of such photographs. However, it may well be overturned by the Supreme Court as an unconstitutional infringement of freedom of the press.

Even if such a ban were upheld, the federal government could not prevent the dissemination of such imagery by non-US sources. A Swedish-based news organization calling itself the Space Media Network was formed to buy imagery from commercial satellites, analyze it, and disseminate it to world media organizations. The organization has broken stories based on imagery documenting Soviet laser weapons sites, the previously secret Saudi Arabia basing of intermediate range missiles purchased from the Chinese government and the location of a 1957 nuclear disaster in the Soviet Union never admitted by the Soviet government.¹⁵ In a US military conflict, the Space Media Network could readily provide information on US military activities that would be classified in the US and unavailable to the American public through American media, yet printed and broadcast worldwide.

With the advent of broadcast satellites, the ability to limit what Americans see from other nations has nearly disappeared. For example, if the Canadian Broadcasting Company obtained sensitive military photographs, much of the extreme northern tier of the United States could see them on Canadian television news. With the proliferation of home satellite dishes, many Americans can receive foreign news programs directly from a broadcast satellite. Moreover, as home satellite systems become smaller and less expensive, they will proliferate and news from foreign broadcasts will become more difficult to control.
The concern about the presence of journalists in the combat zone does not merely involve logistics. There is also a fear of the effects of the news sent back home. Those effects fall into two broad categories—national security and public relations.

Administration officials assert that press reports can easily harm the war effort. The enemy may benefit from a free distribution of information about the activities of US troops. At the commencement of the Gulf War, Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney declared that “even the most innocent-sounding information could be used directly against the men and women whose lives are on the line carrying out these operations.”

The very technological developments that have enhanced the news media’s ability to report news quickly have also increased the likelihood that such information will reach enemy hands. The Iraqis made no secret of the fact that Saddam Hussein was picking up CNN via satellite. Hordes of journalists running across the battlefield may well confuse both sides.

There is also the fear of poor public relations—how the war will look to the folks back home. Military officials argue that the American public will not support war if it is shown graphically on television, especially at dinner time. One retired admiral complained at a symposium that his concern was that when the press “write about us, you make us look bad.”

Television has been blamed by some military officers and scholars for the evaporation of public support for the Vietnam War. It has been charged with purposely focusing on the body bags, the gore, and the confusion in wartime to scuttle US military actions. This fear animated the Reagan and Bush administrations in their approach to media coverage of military actions.

However, scholarly evidence to support the conventional wisdom that the press carries an anti-war bias has been lacking. Two studies of press coverage of the Vietnam War found that the press was largely supportive of the war until after public opinion had clearly turned against achieving a military victory. One study of 1200 television news stories concluded that two-thirds
were neutral, while twice as many of those with bias supported the administration's policy. In the same study, public affairs programs such as "Meet the Press" and "Issues and Answers" were studied for bias. The bias of the invited guests shifted from war supporters to opponents only after 1972, when public opinion had already changed. Another study of television news coverage concluded television news did not emphasize filmed coverage of the dead or wounded or even combat.

This is true not only for Vietnam, but also subsequent military actions. During the five months of Desert Shield, the press was largely supportive of US role. One study of press coverage found nearly two-thirds of news sources cited in stories expressed support for US policy in the Gulf. Many of the stories focused on human interest, including stories about soldiers packing their bags and being loaded on military air transports, tales of a soldier's life in the desert, including boredom and frustration, and accounts of the varied efforts of Americans back home to support the troops through cards, letters, and free copies of newspapers dominated national news. One example of the early coverage was a Christian Science Monitor about Colin Powell's last words to departing troops: "Rarely in recent memory has a general offering such dockside sentiments spoken for so much of the United States as Powell did last Friday."

The Pentagon apparently sought to maximize the favorable publicity by expanding the size of the press corps during Operation Desert Shield to include non-national media organizations. Under the auspices of the Pentagon's Hometown News Program, nearly 1000 reporters from local news outlets were flown on military aircraft to Saudi Arabia to cover the troops from their hometown. These regional and local media—small metropolitan newspapers and local radio and television stations—were perceived as less critical since they are more interested in the hometown angle rather than the broad national policy perspective. The administrator of the program explained the program's rationale: "If [the media] know that they're getting a free ride and they can't afford the $2,000 ticket, there's probably going to be a tendency to say, 'We'll do good stuff here.'"
Although public support for the war effort did fluctuate throughout Desert Shield, it seemed more to follow events, such as the major buildup of troops in November, than media coverage. During Desert Storm, public support for the operation remained high, again a mirror of strong success in implementation of the policy rather than anything the media had to say.

In sum, then, the press does not harbor an innate anti-war bias in its reporting. Rather, this commercial enterprise which relies on the public for sustained support, plays it safe by reflecting that public's opinion.

However, free access to information that would be beneficial to an enemy is a problem yet to be resolved and the technological advances of the news media will aggravate the problem in the near future.

GOVERNMENTAL RESPONSE

In response to the logistical problems, security leaks, and the perception of a media antiwar bias (or at least a critical approach to governmental policy), recent administrations have sought to restrict the news media's autonomy in covering US military engagements. These restrictions have included denial of access to the combat zone, prohibitions on who can be interviewed, who and what can be photographed, and even censorship of stories before they are filed.

Denial of Access. During the Grenada invasion, the press was denied access to the island until the third day of the operation. Even then it was a small pool. Up to the fifth day of the operation, no more than one-fourth of the journalists who sought entrance to Grenada were allowed in. In defense of his decision to exclude the press, the commanding officer of the American invasion force in Grenada later remarked that there were "other priorities to be dealt with" besides press access.26

However, the denial of access brought strong denunciations from the press. The Washington Post termed the policy "inexcusable" and opined that "the government set aside tried-and-true rules for ensuring the media and through them the people would
see, know, and understand in the most timely and credible way how it was exercising military power in their name.”

Time called it “a bad mistake, an outrage to press freedom, and an ominous symptom of a tendency in the Reagan administration to control the flow of information.”

Press Pools. In response to this criticism, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff appointed a panel to study the Defense Department’s actions and the complaints of news organizations. Called the Sidle Panel, after its chairman, General Winant Sidle, the group recommended that for future actions the Pentagon form a National Media Pool to cover the early stages of a military action. The pool was designed to consist of a small number of reporters from several media organizations who would accompany the first wave of any combat operation. By limiting the number of journalists, the logistical problem would be dealt with, while press access would not be completely denied.

Both the military and the press concluded the concept could work well after trial pools were created to accompany military exercises immediately following its creation. However, the success of the real application of this pool has been mixed. The first demonstration in actual combat was the Panama invasion in December 1989. The pool was not allowed to accompany the first group of troops, nor was it allowed near the battle. Instead, it was treated to a succession of news briefings by lower ranking officials.

The second experience, the Gulf War, was somewhat more positive. Twenty pool reporters did accompany the first troops into Saudi Arabia during the deployment in August 1990. But the lack of immediate combat made this pool coverage far different from the situations in Panama or Grenada. The pool was abandoned within a few weeks of US troop arrival and by October, several hundred journalists had poured into the area.

However, on January 15, the eve of the commencement of Operation Desert Storm, the Pentagon reinstated the pool. In response to intense pressure from the press corps, the pools were expanded near the end of the Gulf War. But accounts differ on the extent of that expansion. One press account describes no more
than five pools with seven reporters each or 35 reporters in all were allowed to accompany the troops. However, another account suggests that there were more than 190 reporters accompanying combat forces at the beginning of the ground assault on February 24. Regardless, neither number constitutes more than a small fraction of the 1400 journalists who were assigned to cover the war.

Unilateral. Press frustration with limitations on access have spurred some journalists to become “unilaterals” who cover the front on their own. During the Grenada operation, some enterprising reporters rented a motorboat and landed on Grenada. However, they were discovered and detained for two days by US troops.

Independents were common during the Panama invasion since several reporters were already located in Panama City before the invasion and the urban nature of the conflict inhibited military control of the combat zone.

Several reporters went “independent” during the Gulf War, some of whom were eventually captured by Iraqi forces and detained. Some joined up with allied forces, such as the Egyptians and the Saudis. CBS News correspondent Forrest Sawyer became the only reporter to accompany a pilot on a bombing mission because he abandoned the pool system and travelled with the Saudis. The most well known unilateral was Bob Simon, the CBS News correspondent who, with his camera crew, was detained in Baghdad for several weeks until the end of the war.

The vast size of both the operation and the combat zone in the Persian Gulf War encouraged independence, even though the military threatened punishments for press who ignored the pool system. According to one journalist who became a unilateral, most troops in the field welcomed him when he showed up unexpectedly and even some of the field commanders winked in his presence.

Interviews. Interviews have also been limited. In Vietnam, journalists were allowed to interview any member of the US armed forces. In fact, their best sources were not high ranking officers, but middle or lower ranking officers who understood the
war in the field much better than their superiors.

That was not true in the Gulf War. Journalists were allowed to interview people only with the assent of the public relations officials, and often with those public relations officials standing off to one side.38 In Panama, interviews with wounded soldiers or Panamanian prisoners were banned.39

**Visual Portrayal.** Photographs and videos were banned in some situations. During the Panama invasion, pictures of damaged helicopters or dead servicemen were prohibited.40 The Pentagon provided edited Defense Department videotape of the combat.

In the Gulf War, no pictures of the caskets arriving at Dover Air Force Base were allowed.41 Rather than deny broadcast media requests for videotape of the bombing runs which missed their targets, the public affairs officers merely postponed the issue until the timeliness of the story of the air war had passed.42

**Censorship.** However, the most controversial policy during the Gulf War was the imposition of censorship on press dispatches. On January 9, 1991, the Defense Department announced that all reports from press pools would be subject to a “security review.”43

Not since Korea had the press been subject to prior restraint. News organizations were so upset that thirteen publications and writers charged the rules were unconstitutional and sued the Defense Department.44 Following the war, representatives of 15 major news organizations wrote to Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney complaining that the “flow of information to the public was blocked, impede, or diminished by the policies and practices of the Department of Defense” and expressing their fear that the Gulf War policies will become “a model for the future.”45

As a warning to its readers, as well as a subtle commentary on the Pentagon’s policy, the *New York Times* added a box near its Gulf war stories which read:
Censors Screen Pooled Reports

The American-led military command in Saudi Arabia has put into effect press restrictions under which journalists are assembled in groups and given access to military sources.

The pool reporters obtain information while under military escort, and their accounts are subject to scrutiny by military censors before being distributed. Some of the information appearing today on American military operations was obtained under such circumstances.

Members of the press were not the only opponents to censorship. One former Pentagon spokesman viewed the policy as a potential tool to "protect the military from criticism or embarrassment." 46

The Defense Department argued press censorship was necessary to prevent press revelations of troop movements or locations. The rationale for this limitation was such information was not of great value to the American public, but could be quite useful to the enemy force. If the ability of the nation to win is hampered by the freedom to reveal such information and the lives of many members of the armed services would be in danger, then such a freedom ultimately endangers the nation and would have to be sacrificed. Moreover, the US Supreme Court has already voiced at least theoretical support for such a move. 47

However, there is no empirical evidence the press has been the cause of major national security breaches during recent conflicts. A study of media-military relations during the Vietnam War concluded that not one breach could be confirmed where the North Vietnamese could take advantage or didn’t have other means to gain that knowledge. 48

Moreover, journalists argued military censorship during the Persian Gulf War went far beyond security leaks. When those
sources made some remark which the military censors thought would be impolitic, they were excised from the stories before filing. For example, one journalist’s story described US pilots returning from a bombing run as “giddy.” Military censors changed the word to “proud.”

The censors also seemed to be controlling the information flow for the best public relations advantage. A story about the bombing of Iraq’s nuclear weapons development plants was refused. Two days later, General Norman Schwarzkopf made it public.

Information considered potentially offensive to US allies was excised. For example, during the Gulf War US marines participated in a field battle in a small Saudi Arabian city on the border with Kuwait. However, word of that involvement was not widely disseminated. Due to the high sensitivity of the Arabs to this issue, the US sought to minimize US role. The Saudis also played a role in US news media coverage by initially limiting the number of American journalists who could accompany US troops to Saudi Arabia.

PUBLIC OPINION AND PRESS RESTRICTIONS

These restrictions have received broad support from the American public. During the Gulf War, media complaints about censorship and denial of access fell on deaf public ears. In late January 1991, surveys revealed broad public support for restrictions on media reporting of the war.

More specifically, the pool system received tacit report when a majority of respondents of a Times-Mirror survey said American reporters who bypassed the pool system were going too far to get a story. In the same survey, a large majority expressed support for the view that military censorship is more important than the media’s ability to report important news, and they also believed the military was not holding back bad news but was telling as much as it can.

However, after the war was over and Americans began to reflect, there were some changes in that support. For example, in
a March 1991 survey by the Times-Mirror corporation, 72 percent of the respondents believed at least some information about the war was kept from the public. Over half expressed approval of American news organizations broadcasting Iraq government-censored news, compared with less than half in January. There was also broad support expressed for the media’s role as observer. Seventy percent said neutral news coverage of a war was better than pro-American Coverage.54

In the heat of the moment, the public is most concerned about the pursuit of the war. However, in retrospect, the public voices support for an independent press during wartime.

PREPARING FOR THE NEXT WAR

The succession of military actions during the 1980s and early 1990s and the resulting furor over news media coverage have produced calls for reform of military-media relations. One proffered solution for future military actions is a ban on television cameras.55 Still another is a prohibition on live coverage of combat.56

But the preceding discussion has demonstrated that such simple solutions are logistically impossible, if not ethically and constitutionally unsupportable. The current technology allows news media organizations to challenge the government’s control of information about military operations. Technology that will be operational within this decade will completely eliminate the governmental advantage. Nor is there much the US government at this time legally can do about it.

The not-too-distant technological capability of the press will require the Defense Department to adopt new means for preserving national security rather than placing restrictions on the role of the press. Failure to plan for this eventuality guarantees future legal and ethical battles in the military-media relationship.
35 Keene, op cit.
37 Hedges, op cit.
39 Hoffman, op cit.
40 Hoffman, op cit.


50 Massing, op cit.

51 Massing, op cit.


56 Keene, “Dealing with the Media,” p. 70.