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REPORTERS

ON THE

BATTLEFIELD

The Embedded Press System in Historical Context

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Summary

The March 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq coincided with the first broad implementation of an innovative means of wartime coverage known as "embedded press." Under this system, over 600 reporters from a diverse range of American and international news organizations were "embedded" in U.S. military units, i.e., they traveled with the soldiers in their units, saw what the soldiers saw, and were under fire when troops were—all while bringing live televised coverage of the war into living rooms around the world.

Although the embedded press system has been heralded as a great success, no systematic evaluation of this system has yet been undertaken. This research seeks to address this need by examining the role of the embedded press in Iraq within the broader context of historical press-military relations. In particular, we focus on the tensions arising from long-standing differences between the military and the press with regard to the dissemination of information during wartime: While the military is focused chiefly on preventing information of value from falling into enemy hands, the press aims to broadcast the full story to the public.

To examine the role of the embedded press, we have constructed an evaluative framework that considers the goals of the press, the military, and the public—the three relevant constituencies for press-military relations. We use this framework to develop a set of measures for evaluating the embedded press system in relation to other options for organizing press-military relations as revealed through comparative case studies. We have conducted preliminary analyses, where pos-

sible, using these methods, which will be appropriate for future systematic analyses.

The Potential for Conflict Arises from the Different Missions of the Press and the Military

As is to be expected, the press and the military have different missions and characteristics, as well as different goals with regard to wartime news coverage. These differences are highlighted in Table S.1. Of special significance is the contrast between the press's focus on its mission of reporting and the military's focus on its operational mission. The press's interest in gaining access to information so that it can inform the public (both to fulfill its obligations to the public and to garner profits and/or ratings for its parent organization) can come into direct conflict with the military's need to ensure operational and informational security.

Despite these key differences, the military and the press do share certain commonalities. Both aspire to a high level of professionalism, and both focus on serving the public, albeit in very different ways. The military exists to defend and protect the United States and its territories, while the press exists to keep the public informed; both roles are considered critical to a healthy democracy. But while both institutions serve the public interest, there is a tension between reporters' need for access to information and the military's need to maintain operational security. Surveys have shown that, in resolving this tension, the public has consistently favored the military's need for operational security over the press' desire for full disclosure. Nonetheless, the public also has goals of receiving a high level of war coverage and in being "well-served" by such coverage.

Table S.1
Comparison of Press and Military Missions and Goals

Press	Military
Mission	
Reporting	Protection and defense of the United States
Mission-Related Goals	
Uphold obligations to the public Achieve profits	Achieve operational success Maintain operational security
Organizational Attributes	
Horizontal/competitive Reflexive Reactive Professional	Hierarchical/cooperative Reflexive Reactive and Proactive Professional
Goals for News Coverage	
Gain access to newsworthy information Provide newsworthy information to the public Fulfill obligations to the public Build market share Maintain quality of news Objectivity (tell both sides of the story) Accuracy Credibility	Do not allow news coverage to compromise operational security Fulfill legal obligations regarding press access Use news coverage to support military mission Obtain good public relations Build credibility Support information operations

Tensions Between the Press and the Military Have Led to a Variety of Press Access Strategies

The history of press-military relations illustrates several critical junctures in the trajectory of their interactions. In Vietnam, the press enjoyed high levels of access to operations, largely because of the relatively amicable relationship that had developed between the press and the military, particularly in World War II. However, this relationship experienced a significant shift during the Vietnam War, as news cov-

erage critical of both the war and the military engendered tensions. The legacy of these tensions significantly influenced press-military relations in later operations in Grenada and Panama. Another notable shift occurred during the first Gulf War, however, establishing the basis for new kinds of press access, which ultimately led to the embedded press system used during major combat operations in Iraq in 2003.

Embedded Press Is One of Several Options for Organizing Press-Military Relations

The embedded press system can be considered along a continuum of idealized options for organizing press-military relations, each of which involves a particular strategy for press access. At one end of the continuum for press access is *denial of access*, under which press coverage is limited to official sources only. *Press pools* represent a somewhat more open system of access, under which a small number of preselected reporters are allowed access to some otherwise unavailable sources of information; in exchange for that access, reporters pool their resources with each other. As already noted, *embedded press* means that reporters travel with military units, seeing what they see. At the other end of the continuum is *unilateral journalism*. Under this strategy, reporters operate with broad freedom of access, either by freely joining or leaving troops in the field and traveling on any military vehicle with space available; or by participating in the more free-form "cowboy" or "four-wheel-drive" journalism, in which reporters reject both the constraint of traveling with the military and any military-imposed constraints on access.

Access strategies typically interact with different operational security strategies, including credentialing, under which reporters agree on their professional honor not to violate the confidence of the military; censorship, in which the military unilaterally decides that certain information cannot be released to the public; and "security at the source," under which military personnel agree to be circumspect in deciding what information to share with reporters.

To evaluate the success of the embedded press, we developed a series of measures based on the military and press goals highlighted above, as well as additional measures related to the public's interests. A full list of outcomes and measures can be found in Table 4.3 on pp. 73–74. In comparing systems for press-military relations, we considered the ways in which access strategies can interact with different operational security strategies.

The Embedded Press System Can be Judged as Widely Successful Across a Broad Range of Outcomes and Measures

Military Outcomes

Do not allow news coverage to compromise operational security. Although, in the abstract, embedded press is one of the most vulnerable systems of press-military relations from an operational security standpoint, our research found that, given the potential magnitude of the threat, operational security during the major combat operations phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) was generally intact and protected far more than it was violated. At the same time, operational security was not perfect, nor was it close to the military's target threshold of "secure." Available evidence indicates that there were fewer than half a dozen "disembeddings" for violations of operational security, and there was no evidence of any compromises of operational security in which Iraqi forces took advantage of violations of security.

Fulfill legal obligations regarding press access. Embedded press as implemented in Iraq succeeded well in terms of fulfilling legal obligations. Perhaps at risk to operational security, the military gave broad access to troops and fighting, while the embedded press made great quantities of information available to the public, who followed the war closely.

Obtain good public relations. The embedded press in Iraq, coupled with the decisive military victory and the by-and-large exemplary performance of U.S. forces, resulted in excellent public relations for the military. Perhaps the only exception was negative coverage during

the second week of the war. News coverage of the major combat operations phase was carried out with far fewer press complaints than seen in previous major conventional operations, such as those in Grenada, Panama, and the first Gulf War.

Build credibility. The analysis suggested that the military was very careful to protect its credibility, and it was reasonably successful at doing so. Although vague or tentative information released in U.S. Central Command briefings may have irked the press, the military took care to avoid making erroneous claims and carefully qualified the language of uncertainty when relaying unverified reports.

Support information operations. Operation Iraqi Freedom contained two main examples of the military's successful incorporation of press coverage in "honest" information operations. The "shock and awe" campaign at the beginning of the war made the press a willing participant in showing the advancing might of U.S. armed forces; while this display did not result in complete Iraqi submission, it likely had some effect, although this is difficult to measure. Press coverage was also used effectively to debunk false claims made by the Iraqi Minister of Information.

Press Outcomes

Establish a satisfactory access arrangement. The embedded press system as implemented allowed the press unprecedented access. The system used in Iraq included not only the embedded press, but other forms of press access, including unilateral reporting and official information releases from the U.S. Central Command.

Ensure reporter safety. In general, risks to reporters under an embedded press system were comparable to the risks to the soldiers they were accompanying. The number of reporters killed during the main combat phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom was thirteen, four of whom were embedded reporters. Given the relative number of embedded versus unilateral reporters, embedding in Iraq was safer than reporting unilaterally, but still risky.

Fulfill obligations to the public. The public generally approved of the coverage of the major combat operations phase of OIF. While public approval almost certainly results from a variety of factors be-

yond the issue of whether or not the public receives sufficient information to exercise their democratic rights, approval can reasonably be imputed at least in part from the information's effectiveness in helping people exercise those rights.

Build market share. While we did not seek data about the relative market success of different press agencies, poll data asking respondents about their sources of information on the war suggest that the embedded press system created conditions favorable to live television coverage. It is unclear whether this type of coverage was viewed at the expense of, or in addition to, other news formats.

Maintain quality journalism. Our view—based on public opinion data, a study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, and news analysis—suggests that coverage of major combat operations during OIF was generally of "good" quality, although there was room for improvement. In particular, our historical narrative revealed several concerns with journalistic quality during major combat operations in Iraq—most related to fears of patriotic bias or to the potential for embedded reporters to lose their objectivity because of their companionship with troops.

Build credibility. Public opinion polls suggest that coverage of major combat operations during OIF improved the perception of the media among some members of the public, but worsened the perception among others. Many felt that reporters were too eager to paint either a negative or a positive picture of the war, suggesting a baseline expectation of bias that is not consonant with high credibility.

Public Outcomes

Public satisfaction, information, and service. Several public opinion polls suggest that, by and large, the public was well satisfied with wartime coverage.

The Embedded Press System Is Not Without Future Risks

A comparison of the embedded press with other systems of press-military relations used in previous conflicts suggests that, although, in

general, a combination of embedded press and unilateral journalism has favorable or positive outcomes across the board, there are still potential risks involved, particularly to operational security and reporter safety. Such risks can be mitigated to a large extent through a system of credentials to register and to screen reporters, such as that used in Iraq.

The use of the embedded press system in future operations could raise additional risks as follows, which also need to be mitigated:

- *Legacies of previous conflicts.* What has gone before matters. Given the successes of the embedded press system in the war in Iraq, the majority of stakeholders from the military, press, and public will expect to see some form of this system used in the next major U.S. military operation; should that fail to occur, certain expected "relationship" outcomes, such as military public relations with the press and the public, are likely to be diminished simply because of disappointed expectations.
- *Developments in technology.* Given the changes wrought by technological innovations such as the real-time global coverage made possible by advances in portable satellite-based communications, it is not inconceivable that some future innovation will further change the nature of coverage and force innovation and change in future press-military relations.
- *Planning and lead time.* Longer lead times afford planners the opportunity to consider press relations well in advance and develop appropriate access strategies. Anything that shortens the time the press has to prepare (such as crisis operations or secrecy) creates constraints on the implementation of certain press systems, including the potential for embedding reporters.
- *Nature of operations.* The nature of a military operation can have an important impact on several press-military outcomes. For example, air wars and special operations can be difficult for the press to cover effectively. Also, as the quality of opposing forces increases, so too do the risks to operational security and the danger to reporters posed by embedding.

- *The value of victory.* Systems of press-military relations such as the embedded press system rely heavily on the ability of U.S. forces to successfully complete their missions with a minimum of errors. Victory all but assures the military of good public relations with the population at large and increases the likelihood of good relations with the press if it is coupled with broad press access. In contrast, when military operations go poorly, press-military relations can come under severe strain, especially if the press has been granted broad access.

Recommendations for Addressing Other Possible Shortcomings of the Embedded Press System

Our analysis led us to identify several recommendations for addressing potential problems with the use of embedded press in future operations.

- The embedded press system creates a hierarchy of credentials between embedded reporters and unilateral reporters. To avoid potential resentments and related problems, future systems would do well to consider credentialing and validating unilateral reporters to some extent.
- Although embedded reporters get a close-up view of operations, that view is also somewhat narrow, producing what has been called a "soda-straw effect." This effect can be mitigated to the extent that the public has access to the views provided by many "soda straws." Also, editors or producers can help to ensure that these views are synthesized into easily digestible reports. In addition, embedding should continue to be supplemented by other systems of press access that provide different perspectives.
- Some believe that the embedded press system can lead reporters to lose their objectivity because they identify too closely with the soldiers with whom they are embedded. Given the myriad pressures and possible sources of bias that are brought to bear on reporters every day, we did not find the potential bias inherent in

the embedding process to be of great concern; however, further research may be warranted.

- The effects of technology and the 24-hour news cycle should not be underestimated. Coverage provided by the embedded press, together with increases in other forms of media coverage, can exaggerate both good and bad news. Increased coverage makes information available to the public that had previously been available only to military personnel, in some cases resulting in pressure on political and military authorities to respond more quickly than in the past. This is a real concern for decisionmakers and field commanders alike and may not serve the public interest.

- With the embedded press system, the extent to which risks to operational security are mitigated depends to a large extent on the integrity and professionalism of reporters. In order to ensure that reporters can fulfill their obligations, it will be important for news organizations to assign experienced journalists to combat operations and to make these reporters familiar with military operations in advance of their embedding.