Shoot First and Ask Questions Later: media coverage of the 2003 Iraq War
Justin Lewis, Rod Brookes, Nick Mosdell, Terry Threadgold (2006)

Reviewed by Annabelle Lukin

Shoot First and Ask Questions Later: media coverage of the 2003 Iraq War is a book reporting the findings of a study commissioned by the BBC to look into the 'implications of embedding' as a news gathering strategy during the Iraq war. The book was a 'must-read' for me, a postdoctoral research fellow investigating the media coverage of the Iraq war, and struggling myself to articulate the crucial questions about the role of the media in reporting this war. The research brief – 'the implications of embedding' – immediately suggests a question: the implications for whom? The book devotes three chapters to the implications of embedding from the military perspective (Chapters 2–4), one to 'the journalists' perspective' (Chapter 5), as well as one chapter reporting from surveys and focus groups with viewers in Britain 'to explore public attitudes to the war, response to broadcast media coverage, and what people learned from that coverage' (p157) (Chapter 8).

Given the hierarchic nature of the military, the concept of 'the military perspective' is perhaps the simplest of these to operationalise. Chapters 3 and 4 are based on interviews with officials responsible for the embed policy in the two countries. Interesting differences emerge between the two countries, with the US military dealing with a public largely in favour of the war, while

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this was not the case in Britain. As a Colonel involved in Media Operations at MoD told the authors: 'The American approach was simply the provision of an ability to spectate. And they were completely satisfied with simply providing the spectacle…they were delivering messages to a convinced audience, whereas we were not'. The basis for the embedding arrangement in the US was set out in a jointly negotiated document between the media and military (called the 'Public Affairs Guidelines'), itself an illustration of close co-operation between the two. The Pentagon's interviews are not particularly revealing – as the authors note, their interviewees 'had been trained to respond in exactly the same way to questions, from the media or the military or from interviewers like us' (p40).

The Ministry of Defence officials report some dissatisfaction with the embed programme, partly because reports from embedded journalists were necessarily 'deep but narrow'. In the opinion of the MoD officials interviewed, this militated against delivering information about the broader purposes of the invasion, with the Select Committee on Defence arguing that 'the mass of tactical level detail which formed the bulk of the reports from the embedded journalists obscured the overall strategic picture and that the result was to give disproportionate importance to minor engagements' (cited in Lewis et al., p76). This lack of the larger picture was seen to be consequential in the UK, where the public support for the war was significantly lower than in the US. These officials believed the media briefings at the 'Coalition' media centre in Qatar would be the means by which their officials could give the public access to 'the big picture', but the UK broadcasters gave very little time to the official briefings. Lewis et al.'s research indicates 4% of news reports as coming from the CentCom briefings, and they note a general dissatisfaction with the 'credibility and quality' of information from CentCom.

Chapter 2, titled 'background to embedding', contextualises these two chapters, through a discussion of concepts such as 'information warfare' 'information dominance' and 'psychological operations'. The chapter gives a sense of the degree to which information control is part of military strategic planning. In addition, the authors discuss the increasing use of public relations expertise in the waging of war. Compare for instance the preparations for media coverage of the Iraq war (which began as early as September 2002 in the US) with the situation of the Falklands War (discussed in Chapter 1, in which different models of war reporting are presented), where the UK Ministry of Defence left until last the issue of how to handle the media. At the same time, they suggest this war features a new kind of blurring of the traditional distinction between psychological operations ('permissible deception of the enemy') and the public affairs/military-press interface ('designed to transmit honest messages to home audiences'), although Lasswell's classic 1927 study of propaganda techniques

in World War 1 would suggest the distinction has probably never been very clear.

The chapter detailing the war from the perspective of journalists – titled '"In Bed" with the Military?' – is based on interviews with 23 journalists, editors and news directors from British TV news outlets, and 5 editors and journalists from al-Jazeera.[1] Although at times it seemed much of the evidence was no more than anecdotal, the interviews bring out some important issues around embedding – such as the journalist's dependence for food, water, security and transport on the unit with which they are embedded, and the virtual absence of any direct censorship by military personnel. This absence of censorship is particularly significant– suggesting that self-censorship by journalists, and editorial and production staff, as a response to their perceptions of what it is possible to broadcast, is more effective for the military in managing information.

The chapter also raises the topic of journalists reporting 'the views of Iraqi civilians', with the authors suggesting a disparity between 'reporters on the ground giving a more nuanced account of Iraqi opinion, and reports from London inclining more toward the celebratory' (p103). A deeper issue is overlooked here. While it is not hard to see why the views of 'ordinary Iraqis' would be considered newsworthy, the problem is to determine how much evidence a journalist requires to lay claim to such views. The war's most famous blogger, Salam Pax, drew attention to this issue in a post on March 9, 2003 (http://dear_raed.blogspot.com/2003_03_01_dear_raed_archive.html):

> A BBC reporter walking thru the Mutanabi Friday book market (again) ends his report with :
>
> 'It looks like Iraqis are putting on an air of normality'
>
> Look, what are you supposed to do then? Run around in the streets wailing? War is at the door eeeeeeeeeeeee! Besides, this 'normality' doesn't go very deep. Almost everything is more expensive than it was a couple of months ago, people are digging wells in their gardens, on the radio yesterday after playing a million songs from the time of the war with Iran…they read out instructions on how to make a trench and prepare for war, that is after president saddam advised Iraqis to make these trenches in their gardens.
>
> But in order not to disappoint the BBC; me, Raed and G. put on our 'normal' faces and went to buy CDs from Arassat Street in a demonstration of normality.

The blogger goes on to list the other 'normal' activities of the week, like taping up windows, installing a manual pump on the well, and preparing two rooms

of the house for relatives unable to stay in their own homes, all further evidence contradicting the impression offered by the BBC reporter.

The issue of the amount and kind of evidence for claims is not particular to this war or this particular aspect of it – but rather derives from the nature of reporting as a social activity (Hasan, 1999). Reporting is a specialised kind of recounting (ibid), and reporters in principle have their authority by virtue of a particular expertise in the skills of researching stories, checking facts, and seeking out relevant and important sources of information. Yet the basis on which claims – such as how ordinary Iraqis feel about the 'Coalition' invasion, or what the 'mood' might be in neighbouring countries – are made is rarely debated, much less codified.

Perhaps it reveals my own bias to say that the crucial test of the media coverage is the media coverage. Certainly the military accounts of what they did and why in relation to managing the media can be relevant, and the issues faced by journalists reporting from a war zone are important to setting out the context. But in order to get anywhere in evaluating the media coverage – e.g. did it give undue preference to reporting the 'Coalition' perspective; did it offer insights into the experiences of civilians; did it enable viewers/readers/listeners to understand anything of the historical context of the war – we need to examine how the media reported the war. I was surprised, given the book's subtitle, that only two chapters (6 and 7) deal with the news coverage.

The research data included 'all the wartime weekday broadcasts of BBC News at Six; ITV Evening News at 6.30 p.m.; Channel 4 News at 7 p.m.; and Sky News at Ten' – where the term 'wartime' referred to the period up until the 'fall' of Baghdad. The data collected was then categorised using the 'report' as the basic unit of analysis, a boundary which the authors note is not always easy to draw. The result was 1,534 news reports. These reports were then analysed in terms of categories of 'authorship', i.e. did they come from an embedded or unilateral reporter, did they involve an interview with an 'expert', how many involved reporters based in Baghdad, how many were compilations of available footage, etc. Findings from this analysis include that: 48% of these reports were delivered by anchors; 9% by embedded reporters; 6% were reports from Baghdad; 1% by unilateral reporters; 4% reports from military briefings (i.e. from CentCom in Qatar); 15% made from 'available footage' – and were therefore stories not clearly located anywhere.

As the authors note, these figures do not take into account length of the stories, nor the ordering. The low figure for military briefings was in contrast to the 1991 Gulf War in which, according to Taylor 1992, military briefings from Riyadh, Dhahran, Washington and London dominated the media coverage (cited in Lewis et. al., p117). The authors also tabulate the use of on-screen sources, showing that 46% were UK or US government or military, 30% were

official Iraqi sources 5% were other media, and 7% were Iraqi citizens. Other 'broad themes' explored in these reports included the representation of Iraq's 'WMD' capability (they report that of 186 'mentions', 89% implied capability, with 11% doubting capability) and references to the 'state of the Iraqi people' (from which they report that of all mentions of Iraqi people, 29% were concerned with those welcoming the invasion, 16% not welcoming the invasion, and 30% concerned civilian casualties (with variation among the 4 channels on this score). These figures are then plotted against story type, illustrating that while Sky TV embeds show Iraqis welcoming the invasion three times more often than not welcoming the invasion, overall, embedded reporters were about equally likely to show Iraqis welcoming the invasion as those antagonistic towards the Coalition (p124).

Chapter 7, Sources and Stories, involves a series of 'case studies', in which 'a more detailed analysis' of the coverage of select stories is pursued, in order to provide a 'more qualitative sense of the way the war was reported'. The chapter deals with a selection of widely reported stories which were later proved false, as well as a selection of other big news stories, including the shooting of civilians at checkpoint near Najaf, the battle for Nasiriyah, and what they refer to as 'the final stages of the war', referring to the 'siege of Baghdad' and the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein. Additional material from radio is introduced at this point, as well as reports from the al-Jazeera satellite channel.

The research offers genuine and significant findings, such as the relative lack of interest in seeking commentary from civilians, and the largely uncritical acceptance of the 'Coalition' claims about WMDs. I would like to have seen the units of analysis more clearly specified, particularly the unit of 'reference' in Chapter 6 (the basis for the findings on the representation of Iraq's WMD capability) and 'claim' in Chapter 7 (the basis for findings on how four stories which turned out to be false were presented in the British broadcast media). Without some kind of definition, it is difficult either to replicate the study, or to use these findings to compare with the analysis of a related data set.

My dissatisfaction took me back to Hansen et al.'s argument about the nature of content analysis, which 'provides no pointers to what aspects of texts should be examined, or how those dimensions should be interpreted' (Hansen et al., 1998: 99). As a research method, content analysis must take such dimensions from a theoretical framework which has 'a clear conceptualisation of the nature and social context of the documents which are to be examined' (ibid). Hansen et al. also note that the 'conceptually most taxing aspect of any content analysis' is defining precisely what features or dimensions of the data should be analysed (ibid: 106), and this is where media studies has intersected with discourse analysis and linguistics.

A central aim of the book is to challenge approaches which have 'character-ized the whole exercise as lies, propaganda, and media distortion' (p15, the authors cite the work of Miller 2004 as an instance of this approach. As far as I can determine, 'whole exercise' refers to embedding, although Lewis et al. do not make this entirely clear). The authors reject this claim as simplistic, and state their intention to 'tease out the complex strands of information/communication that were actually involved' (p15). In the final chapter, the authors conclude that the 'pro-war tilt' of the media was '*in spite of*, rather than *because of* embedded reporting' (p190, emphasis in original), although they go on to say that embedded reporters 'play[ed] a role in constructing a pro-war narrative' (ibid), and that embedding was the 'the biggest public relations coup of the war' (p197), in which the media were 'intimately and complicitly (sic) involved' (ibid). They also make the rather naïve claim that 'many British embeds generally did maintain their objectivity' (p196) 'leaving me surprised to find the term "objectivity"'.

One of the complexities of this research project was that with the BBC as the commissioning institution the researchers were not only furthering knowledge on the question of the media's role in reporting war, but also providing ideas and recommendations for practising journalists and others involved in the production of news. As far as I am aware, the report produced for the BBC has unfortunately not been publicly released. *Shoot First* provides some important insights into the workings of the relationship between the media and the mili-tary as the invasion took place. Four years on, and the war has produced 600,000 violent civilian deaths (Burnham et al., 2006), over 2 million refugees living in neighbouring Syria, Jordan, Egypt and Lebanon, and 1.7 million internally displaced people (*The Guardian Weekly*, Feb 2–8 2007, p18). However one interprets the contribution of embedding to the media coverage of the early phase of the war, we are a long way from understanding how a debacle of this scale still has such a partial treatment through the commercial and public media of the 'Coalition' countries.

Notes

1   There are several spellings of 'al-Jazeera'. This is the form adopted in the book.

Book reviewed

Lewis, J., Brookes, R., Mosdell, N. and Threadgold, T. (2006) *Shoot First and Ask Questions Later: media coverage of the 2003 Iraq War*. New York: Peter Lang. 212pp. ISBN 0820474185.

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