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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE / COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES
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EXERCISE / EXERCICE NEW HORIZONS

LIVE BROADCAST OF COMBAT OPERATIONS IN MODERN WAR: A STEP TOO FAR?

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ABSTRACT

Recent advances in technology have enabled the media to broadcast reports live from the battlefield to a worldwide audience. However, although live broadcast offers the potential for wider dissemination of information, experience from the battlefield during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM in 2003 has highlighted that live broadcast puts the lives of soldiers directly at risk by compromising operational security.

Historically, the military has tried many methods, some more successful than others, to control the media and prevent breaches in operational security. This paper investigates the reasons for, as well as the disadvantages and advantages of, live coverage from the battlefield. Furthermore, it discusses the possible alternatives to live coverage of combat operations and recommends an option for inclusion of the media in future military operations that will minimise breaches in operational security.

[A] great part of the information obtained in war is contradictory, a still greater part is false, and by far the greatest part is of a doubtful character.¹

Carl von Clausewitz,
On War 1832

Live television coverage of global news stories is now taken for granted in most countries around the world. Although live broadcast is no longer a technological wonder, news networks still emphasise the fact that their reports are live, ensuring that the word “live” is superimposed over their coverage of everything from sport to war.² Recent improvements in media technology have meant that a majority of news events are now covered live as a matter of routine. These technological developments and increasing live coverage of military operations have had a dramatic impact on the military-media relationship. However, technological developments are nothing new. It is the speed with which they have occurred that has had the most dramatic effect.

In the last fifteen years, advances in technology have seen the emergence of worldwide satellite television, the Internet, the development of miniaturised hand-held digital cameras, wide-band cellular phones with satellite uplinks and hand-held computers facilitating continuous live broadcast from anywhere in the world at any time of day. As each technological advance has offered the potential for wider dissemination of information, so has it increased the risk to the military in the conduct of its combat operations.

Courtesy of modern media technology, anyone with a television can watch events

¹ Robert Debs Heinl Jr, *Dictionary of Military and Naval Quotations* (United States: Naval Institute Annapolis, Maryland, 1985), 160.

² Live broadcast has been an option, albeit initially a difficult and expensive one, since 1948. Barrie Dunsmore, *The Next War: Live?* (Harvard University, March 1996), 1.

unfold live on the battlefield. Anecdotal evidence suggests that television viewers can watch live reports of events on the battlefield at the same time, or in many cases before, military commanders are able to see the action themselves. These improvements in technology are, therefore, a potential source of danger for the military forces conducting their operations in today's world of live and uncensored twenty-four hour television news. Indeed, live television coverage from the battlefield raises major security, political and journalistic questions. This paper will focus solely on the security risks posed by live television coverage from the battlefield. Comment will be limited to matters related to the military consequences of live reporting and its threat to operational security.³ The thesis of this paper is that live broadcast by journalists during combat operations is unacceptable as it risks soldiers' lives by compromising operational security.

In considering this issue, firstly, the paper will analyse the evolution of media participation in major wars since 1961 when Vietnam became the first "television" war.⁴ This analysis will identify the effects that the media has had in shaping the modern battlefield and highlight the different methods, some successful and others not, that the military has used previously in an attempt to control the media and maintain operational security during its combat operations. Secondly, current military-media issues will be discussed. Thirdly, the paper will investigate the reasons for, as well as the disadvantages and advantages of, live coverage from the battlefield in order to assess the risk posed to operational security. During this section, the paper will highlight two recent

³ Operational security in Canada is defined as the principle of safeguarding the integrity of a military operation or activity and/or the safety of [Canadian Forces] members. Department of National Defence, *Public Affairs Handbook: Guide des affaires publiques 1999*, 94.

⁴ Peter Young and Peter Jesser, *The Media and the Military: From the Crimea to Desert Strike* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 79.

examples of breaches in operational security caused by live coverage direct from the battlefield. Finally, the paper will discuss the possible alternatives to live coverage of combat operations and recommend an option for inclusion of the media in future military operations that will minimise breaches in operational security.

The age of modern war reporting can be traced back to the late nineteenth century and specifically to the invention of the electric telegraph, the first communication technology to travel at the speed of light.⁵ Other significant landmarks in media war reporting prior to Vietnam include the introduction of the cine camera during the Boer War;⁶ the imposition of strict military censorship during World War I (WWI);⁷ the advent of worldwide radio broadcast in 1930;⁸ and the introduction of the “media pool” concept during World War II (WWII).⁹ Warfare continued to be tightly controlled by the military through strict military censorship until the United States (U.S.) went to war in Vietnam in 1961.¹⁰

⁵ The fastest way to pass information prior to the invention of the electric telegraph was by train or a carrier pigeon, averaging a little over thirty-five miles per hour. Johanna Neuman, *Lights, Camera, Action: Is Media Technology Driving International Politics?* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 26.

⁶ Mitchell P. Roth, *Historical Dictionary of War Journalism* (London: Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, 1997), 34.

⁷ All correspondents during WWI had to present their reports to official military censors. This ensured that news of the bloodshed in the trenches was downplayed for public consumption and that operational security was tightly controlled. With United States entry into the war in 1917, rules for U.S. journalists reporting on the war were equally, if not more strict than the British. Publishing of any story that could be broadly defined as breaching operational security, in that it interfered with the military or assisted the enemy, brought with it a sentence of twenty years in federal prison. Moreover, publishing pictures from the front-line carried a maximum sentence of the death penalty. *Ibid*, 350 and Major Edward T. Nye, U.S. Army, *The Role of Public Affairs in Special Operations and Missions* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2002), 25.

⁸ Mitchell P. Roth, *Historical Dictionary of War Journalism ...*, 352.

⁹ WWII saw the first use of the “media pool” concept, whereby selected reporters were given special access to battlefields and other important events on the premise that they would share their news with non-members of the media pool. The “media pool” was another attempt by the military to maintain operational security by limiting the number of journalists having access to war information and control the dissemination of information leaving the battlefield. *Ibid*, 352.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 325.

Vietnam was the first real ‘television’ war ... where ... the military found themselves attempting to control a media which was not fully supportive of their country’s involvement. It was also the first ‘open’ limited conflict, where the full weight of the modern media was deployed without restriction.¹¹

The military’s decision not to impose formal censorship of the press, combined with the advent of new technology in the form of the colour television and the communications satellite, arguably led to Vietnam being the most media criticised war in history.¹² The media immediately focused on combat coverage from the battlefield. War was suddenly transformed – it was no longer something that took place in a far off continent, halfway around the world.¹³ The U.S. public soon grew tired of the gruesome colour scenes of war that were brought daily to most living rooms of America.¹⁴ During the late 1960s and early 1970s, in the face of what had become a drawn out and increasingly unpopular war, U.S. public opinion swayed and Vietnam was lost when the American public exercised their right to influence matters of national security and foreign policy by withdrawing their support for a continued U.S. presence in Vietnam.¹⁵ The U.S. military’s failure to control the media in Vietnam had huge ramifications on the conduct and media coverage of all future military operations. Furthermore, it led the U.S. military to have deep-rooted mistrust for, and in some cases contempt for, the media.¹⁶

¹¹ Peter Young and Peter Jesser, *The Media and the Military ...*, 79.

¹² Mitchell P. Roth, *Historical Dictionary of War Journalism ...*, 326.

¹³ Richard Bocklet, *Television News Coverage: A Power Misused* (Article 12812 Modern Thought, 2/1987); available from <http://www.worldandi.com/specialreport/1987/february/Sa12812.htm>; Internet; accessed 4 February 2004.

¹⁴ During the Vietnam War, Americans received nightly updates on the war effort on their televisions in the comfort of their homes, courtesy of three national networks. On-scene reporters, some deep in the jungle and others in firebombed Vietnamese villages, reported on the life of the U.S. soldier, the conditions they worked in and the danger they faced as well as the death that beset the U.S. military on an almost daily basis. Sean Stephen McKenna, *Breaking News: A Study of the Effects of Live Television News Coverage During Armed Conflicts* (Southwest Texas State University, 1992), 1.

¹⁵ Mitchell P. Roth, *Historical Dictionary of War Journalism ...*, 326.

¹⁶ Peter Young and Peter Jesser, *The Media and the Military ...*, 96. Author’s note: The main media issue in Vietnam was the loss of public support rather than material breaches in operational security caused

Thereafter, strict censorship re-emerged as the media policy for most nations' military forces and relations between the U.S. military and the media remained at an all time low until the U.S. invaded Grenada in 1983.

Grenada was a landmark occasion as it marked the first real, albeit limited co-operation between the U.S. military and the media since the end of the Vietnam War eight years earlier. To preserve operational security, the military, still extremely wary of the press after the Vietnam experience, banned all media from the island for the first two days of operations.¹⁷ The media's strong protests about this news blackout forced the U.S. military to examine how future military conflicts should be covered by the media.¹⁸ The then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), General John W. Vessey Jr. directed that an investigation be conducted to examine media operations during the Grenada invasion and how to address media issues in the future.¹⁹ The commission's report, named after its chairman, retired Major General Winant Sidle, laid the foundations of media reporting of military operations through the next two decades.

Universally accepted by both the media and the military, the Sidle Report recommended the control of media access through media pools to enable the early access

by television coverage. However, Vietnam is described in this paper due to its importance and effect on future military-media relations.

¹⁷ Margaret H. Belknap, *The CNN Effect: Strategic Enabler or Operational Risk?* (Pennsylvania: U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, 30 March 2001), 5; available from http://www.iwar.org.uk/psyops/resources/cnn-effect/Belknap_M_H_01.pdf; Internet; accessed 11 March 2004. Only a fifteen-person media pool out of a total of approximately four hundred available reporters was allowed onto Grenada, and only after a majority of the operation had been completed.

¹⁸ Warren P. Strobel, *Late breaking Foreign Policy: The News Media's Influence on Peace Operations* (United States: Institute Of Peace Press, Washington, D.C., 1997), 39.

¹⁹ General John W. Vessey Jr. instructed the investigators to answer the question: "How do we conduct military operations in a manner that safeguards the lives of our military and protects the security of the operation while keeping the American public informed through the media?" Major Barry E. Venable, U.S. Army, *The Army and the Media* (CGSC Military Review Jan/Feb 2002), 3; available from www-cgsc.army.mil/milrev/english/

of press to an operation.²⁰ Notwithstanding this recommendation, senior politicians and military officers, still mistrusting the press because of the Vietnam experience, planned Operation JUST CAUSE in Panama in 1989 without any press knowledge in an attempt to maintain operational security. It was only after the commencement of hostilities that a small, tightly controlled media pool was allowed into the country.²¹ However, even though there was a lack of access during the first few hours of operations and general disregard for the recommendations of the Sidle Report, the media did manage to report on ongoing military operations. The resulting television coverage led to Panama being known as the “first war as a media event.”²² CNN²³ began to broadcast the first live reports of military operations back to the U.S. where “studio armchair strategists” were able to perform a critical assessment of ongoing military operations, much to the frustration of the then CJCS, General Colin Powell. Powell quickly realised that he had entered a “new information age military-media relationship.”²⁴ He later stated:

This was a new, tough age for the military, fighting a war as it was being reported. We could not, in a country pledged to free expression, simply turn off the press. But we were going to have to find a way to live with this unprecedented situation.²⁵

By sharp contrast, the media were very enthusiastic after Panama, with Peter Arnett of CNN best summing up the media’s mood at the time:

²⁰ United States, Report By CJCS Media-Military Relations Panel (Sidle Panel), 1984, 8.

²¹ Margaret H. Belknap, *The CNN Effect ...*, 6.

²² Peter Arnett, *Live from the Battlefield: From Vietnam to Baghdad 35 years in the World’s War Zones* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 342.

²³ Cable News Network.

²⁴ Margaret H. Belknap, *The CNN Effect ...*, 7.

²⁵ Colin Powell with Joseph E. Periso, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 433.

The Panama story showed CNN just how alluring live coverage of a crisis could be. CNN now had the technology, the skills and the money to go live anywhere in the world.²⁶

Two years later, Operation DESERT STORM was to become “the most widely and most swiftly reported war in history.”²⁷ However, the media were to once again find themselves heavily reliant on military organised media pools for a majority of their information.

Operation DESERT STORM was the first war in history where live coverage was provided to a worldwide audience.²⁸ The War saw the emergence of what has since become known as the “CNN Era.”²⁹ Nevertheless, the military maintained the upper hand with journalists still heavily reliant on military briefings to media pools and interviews with senior military officers for updated information. Media reporting was generally considered positive, but remained unbalanced and incomplete.³⁰ Although not widely known, military censorship was commonplace.³¹ General Schwartzkopf, the U.S. operational commander during Operation DESERT STORM, managed to maintain operation security and even achieved operational surprise through the careful and limited release of information to press pools and by letting the press see what he wanted them to

²⁶ Peter Arnett, *Live from the Battlefield ...*, 343, and Margaret H. Belknap, *The CNN Effect ...*, 7. The media concluded that to get the required level of live coverage in future conflicts that they could no longer confine themselves to military organised media pools. Reporters would need to be more mobile and less reliant on the military for access, communications and transportation when in a war zone.

²⁷ Miles Hudson and John Stanier, *The War & The media: A Random Searchlight* (Washington Square: New York University Press, 1998), 209.

²⁸ Johanna Neuman, a media historian described the war as the “first showdown between military hardware and satellite communication, pitting global media saturation against military needs for security.” Mitchell P Roth, *Historical Dictionary of War Journalism ...*, 126.

²⁹ CNN is now available in more than 200 countries worldwide. Sean Stephen McKenna, *Breaking News ...*, 25.

³⁰ Margaret H. Belknap, *The CNN Effect ...*, 8.

³¹ Mitchell P. Roth, *Historical Dictionary of War Journalism ...*, 127.

see.³² Moreover, although relatively well developed, media technology still remained a limiting factor, as media equipment was still relatively cumbersome.³³ Military-media relations in the mid-1990s continued to improve, especially in Haiti in 1994, where the military tried an altogether new approach to incorporating media in its operations.

Media were integrated into Operation RESTORE DEMOCRACY in Haiti well in advance of the operation. In fact, some reporters were given the top-secret plans for the operation prior to the planned invasion. Operational security was entrusted to reporters keeping their word and by ensuring the media agreed to a ban on “all broadcast video depicting or describing troop landing locations during the first hour of the intervention.”³⁴ This approach proved extremely successful for a limited, single nation military operation such as Haiti. However, for a multi-national operation such as the U.S.-led NATO air campaign in Kosovo in 1999, a new approach to safeguard operational security had to be established.

General Wesley Clark, NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander Europe attempted to ensure operational security during Operation ALLIED FORCE through the issue of a “gag order.”³⁵ The intent of this order was to preserve operational security by restricting the release of information from both NATO and the Pentagon. The official briefings provided daily by the military only provided limited information and eventually led to the

³² Management of the media during Operation DESERT STORM was achieved through absolute control over the means of communication, transport and access. “So powerful were these weapons that there was no need for actual censorship. Censorship was achieved primarily through denial of access and delay in transmission, backed by a blanket decision not to allow media access to any event that was not strictly controlled.” Peter Young and Peter Jesser, *The Media and the Military* .., 280.

³³ Live broadcast required a team of seven people and a fleet of four vehicles to carry the required equipment. Equipment for live broadcast included a portable satellite ground station with a six-foot dish, a generator, generator fuel, a camera, lights and sound equipment. Barrie Dunsmore, *The Next War* .., 3.

³⁴ Peter Young and Peter Jesser, *The Media and the Military* .., 264.

³⁵ Margaret H. Belknap, *The CNN Effect* .., 11.

media trying to move reporters into the field to report the “real story.” Overall, although the “gag order” was successful in that it prevented breaches in operational security through media sources, the poor handling of the media in Kosovo undid many years of positive work by the military and resulted in a setback in military-media relations. To again rectify this setback, the U.S. and U.K. militaries allowed some seven hundred journalists to be “embedded”³⁶ into front-line military units during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM during 2003 in an attempt to rebuild tender military-media relations.³⁷

By the time that Operation IRAQI FREEDOM took place, technology had advanced enough to allow a two-man news crew with a hand-held digital camera, wide-band cellular phone with a satellite uplink and a laptop computer to broadcast live from the battlefield.³⁸ All embedded journalists were free to send uncensored or self-censored live reports from the battlefield at times controlled by the military. U.S. policy was that the reporter was not to be specifically assigned or escorted by public affairs personnel; rather the unit was the public affairs escort.³⁹ By contrast, the initial plan for U.K. forces was to have a military minder assigned to each reporter, to be present whenever broadcasts were made.⁴⁰ However, military minders were not always available in the

³⁶ The U.S. define embedding as "...the act of assigning a reporter to a unit as a member of the unit. The reporter eats, sleeps, and moves with the unit. The reporter is authorized open access to all sections of the unit and is not escorted by public affairs personnel. Rather, the unit is the public affairs escort. Reporters file their stories from unit locations and security is accomplished at the source, by establishing with the reporter what can be covered and reported on and what cannot be reported on, or when material can be reported." United States, Field Manual, FM 46-1 *Public Affairs Operations* (Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington, D.C., 30 May 1997), 25.

³⁷ United Kingdom, Director General Corporate Communication, *Iraq First Reflections Report* (London: DCCS (Media), July 2003), 16.

³⁸ In 1996, Barrie Dunsmore predicted that the amount of equipment required for live broadcast of a future Gulf War would weigh about to one hundred pounds and be contained in two hand portable cases. Barrie Dunsmore, *The Next War ...*, 3.

³⁹ United States, Field Manual, FM 46-1 *Public Affairs Operations ...*, 25.

⁴⁰ Maj-General (retired) Lewis W. MacKenzie, ‘Embedded’ reporters put soldiers at risk, *National Post*, March 26, 2003.

heat of battle. This, combined with the fact that it was often during the heat of battle that most journalists wanted to file their live report, resulted in the journalist being left on their own to report on whatever they saw, or perceived they saw, with the consequent and unacceptable risk of compromising operational security.⁴¹ In essence, maintenance of operational security relied very much on the reporter knowing what to report and more importantly, what not to report. Overall, whilst aimed mainly at improving military-media relations, embedding did little to ensure that operational security was maintained.⁴²

During each of the wars since Vietnam, the media has had a dramatic effect on the shaping of the battlefield and the way in which the military has conducted its operations. History has shown that the military has tried many different approaches to control the media and preserve operational security, some being more successful than others. However, armed with continuously developing technology, the driving force behind the media has always been to report current events as fast as possible. Today, news media is big business. Major news networks compete for viewers by attempting to broadcast interesting and exciting news stories with better sound bites and graphic pictures more rapidly than their competitors. As an example, CNN's coverage of Operation DESERT STORM in 1991 saw a seven-fold increase in viewing figures during the short time of the war.⁴³ An increased viewing audience results in business corporations investing more

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² This statement is the author's assertion. Public affairs guidance prior to embedding media during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM did set the ground rules governing the conduct of embedded reporters to help preserve operational security. The rules forbade embedded reporters from revealing their precise locations, troop numbers in units below corps level, specific numbers of aircraft, critical supplies or other equipment, locations of units or from divulging any information regarding current or future operations. However, as will be discussed later in this paper, operational security breaches will always be inevitable during live broadcast as a result of something as simple as a "slip of the tongue." U.S. CENTCOM Public Affairs guidance on embedding media during future operations can be found at:

<http://www.cpj.org/Briefings/2003/gulf03/embed.html>; Internet; accessed 20 November 2003.

⁴³ Mitchell P. Roth, *Historical Dictionary of War Journalism* ..., 126.

advertising dollars into a news network, which in turn gives that news network more power over its competitors. On the other hand, the priorities of the military are different with the overarching factor being the requirement to maintain operational security during its operations.

In a perfect world, the military would not release information “... until it has been evaluated for both operational and intelligence purposes.”⁴⁴ With today’s live television coverage being viewed worldwide, it must be assumed that an enemy will be tuned in, watching and listening to unedited coverage of what is happening on the battlefield. Therefore, the worst thing that could happen to a military would be for all of their actions to be broadcast live and uncensored to a worldwide audience.

Media technology, as described in this paper, has been pivotal in the development and evolution of news reporting, and has also fundamentally altered the way that the military plans and fights a war. For the military, the potential for breaches in operational security during military operations has reached an all time high. It is now an extremely difficult, if not impossible task for a military commander to maintain operational security and still achieve surprise in such an open environment. As highlighted above, the military has tried three completely different methods of integrating the media into military operations in just the past twelve years.

The use of media pools, “gag orders” and embedded journalists indicates that the military has yet to find a universal working solution that allows adequate press access whilst ensuring that operational security is maintained. As such, it must not be assumed

⁴⁴ Major Edward T. Nye, U.S. Army, *The Role of Public Affairs in Special Operations and Missions* ..., 22.

that just because the latest iteration of military-media interaction on the battlefield involved embedded journalists broadcasting live, that it will continue for all future conflicts. Each operation has been, and must continue to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis that best suits the requirements of that conflict. The debate over the amount of control that the military should have over the media will continue to be hotly contested in the future.

Ideally, the future military commander should be able to inform the public fully without risking operational security. To enable this, the military will need to, on occasion, limit the amount of access that the media has to certain information at certain times. Correspondingly, the public will need to be informed and understand why this control on access to information is necessary.⁴⁵ This is why it is vital that live broadcast from the front-line during military combat operations is not conducted as a matter of course without first thinking through the consequences of each situation. Even in situations where there may only a slight risk to operational security, the military must exercise control over the media to prevent live broadcast. The following examples will illustrate that adequate control of the media did not occur during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM.

There were several breaches in operational security during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM that can be directly attributed to live television coverage from the battlefield. Each could have risked the lives of soldiers if the enemy had acted upon them – fortunately Iraq was either unable or unwilling to do so. The first example involves a journalist embedded with a U.S. Apache helicopter unit in Iraq. On 25 March 2003,

⁴⁵ Margaret H. Belknap, *The CNN Effect* .., 12.

following a 48-hour sandstorm, the journalist reported that all of the Apaches had been grounded because of the weather. When asked by the network host back in the U.S. if he was aware that a one thousand armoured vehicle convoy had left Baghdad and was moving in his direction, the journalist stated that they wouldn't be able to launch the Apaches or request any fast air strikes due to the weather.⁴⁶ At that point, it appeared as if someone out of the picture attracted the journalist's attention. On camera, the journalist cringed and then explained that he was mistaken and it would be possible for aircraft to engage the armoured column. This information could have given a smarter and better-equipped enemy the knowledge that certain U.S. ground units were without necessary air cover and vulnerable to attack.⁴⁷ A second example involves the U.S. Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade.

On 26 March 2003, one thousand members of the 173rd seized Bashur airfield in Northern Iraq. The paratroopers secured the 2000-metre runway, capable of receiving C-17 aircraft for essential reinforcement by tanks, armoured vehicles and artillery. The reinforcement was critical, as the 173rd soldiers had parachuted in with only personal weapons and whatever else they could carry on their backs. Unfortunately, all did not go as planned and the unit remained without reinforcement for the first night. The embedded reporter with the Brigade filed a live report on worldwide satellite television stating "... that his unit was extremely vulnerable as they had not been reinforced overnight and only had light weapons."⁴⁸ This security breach could have had disastrous

⁴⁶ The report of the 1000 vehicle convoy turned out to be false, but was considered fact at the time. Maj-General (retired) Lewis W. MacKenzie, 'Embedded' reporters put soldiers at risk ...

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Lieutenant Colonel Thomas W. Collins, *173rd Airborne Brigade in Iraq*, (June 2003); available from http://www.geocities.com/air_mech_strike/; Internet; accessed 10 April 2004.

consequences if the enemy had the capability to react and could have led to the unnecessary loss of life.⁴⁹ These are two real life examples that support the thesis statement and demonstrate how breaches in security, as simple as a ‘slip of the tongue’ during a live television broadcast, may put soldiers’ lives at risk. The crucial questions to answer now are why is live broadcast so popular and what are its disadvantages and advantages.

Firstly, live television is compelling to watch and has a huge impact on the viewer. Reporters are able to say, “this is happening as we speak folks” as well as “we don’t know how this will end.”⁵⁰ Viewers are hooked into the story just as they are with an action feature film. Live reporting has the advantage of being both exciting and cheap entertainment, providing twenty-four hours a day exciting real life action with no big production costs. Pete Williams, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defence for Public Affairs and Pentagon spokesman during Operation DESERT STORM, expressed an enlightening view of live television.

I suppose there are purists who would argue that sending back a live picture isn’t journalism.... It may not be journalism, but it is television, and that is a fact of life.⁵¹

This statement exposes the root of this issue – television is a business, and is therefore about making money, not news. In essence, it is not all that important what is shown on the television as long as it is popular and pulls in the required viewing figures. Pete Williams had more to add on this issue in the following statement, which argues that the

⁴⁹ Maj-General (retired) Lewis W. MacKenzie, ‘Embedded’ reporters put soldiers at risk ... and Battling with reality, *National Post*, March 27, 2003.

⁵⁰ Barrie Dunsmore, *The Next War* .., 12.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 4.

main reason for live coverage of a battlefield is solely because it is technically possible.

I just think it's hard to articulate a sound national reason that will get applause outside the National Press Club for live coverage of the battlefield It's hard to stake a claim that live coverage has to be there for any reason other than the fact that we can do it and it would sure be neat.⁵²

Bernard Shaw, famous as a CNN anchorman and one of a select few journalists to report live from the battlefields of Operation DESERT STORM also had serious reservations about live coverage from the battlefield. His statement below highlights some of the major disadvantages.

I would be worried about a lack of perspective, because no matter where you were, you would be operating with no overview of what was going on. And by your mere presence and what is happening to your senses, what you're hearing, what you're feeling, indeed what you're smelling, I would be afraid would cloud your judgement. And it might find you exaggerating, however accurately you were reporting, exaggerating what you were seeing.⁵³

Reporters throughout history have been in the centre of combat, have been shot at, and many have been wounded or killed. But writing about being shot at a few minutes, hours or days after the event is completely different to being filmed live whilst being under fire. As is human nature, some reporters would cope well whilst others would not. Unquestionably, the emotional strain on the reporter is a potential disadvantage of live television coverage on the battlefield.⁵⁴ This emotional strain could lead to reporters to say something unintentionally that would constitute a breach in operational security, as perhaps happened in the two examples illustrated earlier in this paper. Other disadvantages of live reporting from the front-line include the fact that reports only show one extremely small slice of the war, something that is often forgotten by the viewers and

⁵² *Ibid*,13.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 13.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 14.

“studio armchair strategists” that comment on the action; and that there are no filters to the action taking place, often meaning that individual news stories from the front-line are not put into context of the overall situation.

The lack of context will sometimes result in disjointed reporting where insignificant events will acquire an importance that could distort the perceptions of the campaign as a whole, which was certainly the case during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM.⁵⁵ Another vital aspect of live broadcast is what would be the public’s reaction if a breach in operational security, reported live from the battlefield, resulted in the deaths of soldiers of that country. Undoubtedly, there would be a public outcry. The critical question though, is whether the people of that country would be willing to sacrifice some of their democratic freedoms in order to limit the news networks.⁵⁶ This question at present remains unanswered.

Certainly, the requirements of both the military and the media need to be carefully coordinated in the future. However, regardless of the media’s “... journalistic and technological impulses ... to drive ‘live’ coverage of the next conflict,” the military’s requirement for operational security in a conflict must never be jeopardized.⁵⁷ It is doubtful if a journalist would knowingly report a story live or otherwise that could result in a breach in operational security, especially if it could endanger the lives of soldiers or result in the destruction of military assets.⁵⁸ However, with pictures and reports of combat from the battlefield being broadcast live to millions of viewers worldwide, it is

⁵⁵ United Kingdom, Director General Corporate Communication, *Iraq First Reflections Report ...*, 16.

⁵⁶ Barrie Dunsmore, *The Next War ...*, 3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 1 and United Kingdom, Director General Corporate Communication, *Iraq First Reflections Report ...*, 16.

⁵⁸ Sean Stephen McKenna, *Breaking News ...*, 135.

almost impossible to discern whether a comment, picture or report made live could constitute a breach in security until after it has been broadcast. The fact that television viewers are brought to the edge of their seats as they watch events unfold and that the media maintain that they have “the right” to report live wherever and whenever they want, is not reason enough to continue with live reporting from the front-line. The military has a duty to its soldiers to ensure that every effort is made to maintain operational security during its combat operations. Therefore, when the situation demands, a form of censorship must be enforced. The degree of live television coverage, or indeed censorship of the battlefield in future military operations will naturally depend on the nature of the war and the type of battlefield. Battlefields are often difficult to access for civilians, and media will often have to rely on the military for transportation and support once on a battlefield.⁵⁹ There are three basic ways in which military control of the media can be approached.

The first alternative would be to let military-media operations continue unchanged from Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. However, although this may be the simplest solution, it does little to resolve any of the major operational security issues raised in this paper and is therefore not discussed further. The second alternative involves the imposition of complete censorship and military control over the media. However, this is also not discussed as it is perhaps unrealistic and unachievable in today’s modern world of open press access. The third alternative, named “variable censorship” for ease of understanding and clarity in this paper, is a compromise between the first two, whereby varying degrees of censorship could be used depending on the level to which operational

⁵⁹ Barrie Dunsmore, *The Next War* ..., 4.

security is potentially at risk during a certain situation. Although this alternative would require significant co-ordination between the military and the media, it is perhaps the only solution that is workable in today's fast moving, modern world.

Variable censorship achieves the required degree of control over the media by imposing a short delay in transmission of live news broadcasts if a situation warrants such action. The delay would ensure operational security breaches are minimised and the lives of soldiers are not put at risk unnecessarily. Embedding of reporters into front-line military units would continue and they would be given free access to take all the pictures and make all the reports that the media requires. In some circumstances, for example in rear areas and headquarters, embedded reporters would also be allowed to continue broadcasting live reports. However, whenever a live report risked compromising operational security, most likely during combat operations on the front-line, the military, in close co-ordination with the media could decide to impose a short delay in transmission to enable footage to be screened for possible breaches in operational security. A delay would ensure that any "slips of the tongue" or other potential breaches in operational security are removed before transmission of the news. Moreover, a delay would have the added advantage of enabling the necessary analysis to be added to the raw pictures, actually adding to the value of the news being shown to the viewer at home and putting scenes of combat in context of where they sit in the bigger scheme of events. Overall, the introduction of a short delay in transmission would make no difference to the viewing public's enjoyment of the coverage and would help alleviate some of the weaknesses of live reporting identified earlier in this paper.

The only way to reduce the number of breaches of operational security in the future will be to impose some form of military censorship of live reporting at certain critical times. Inevitably, this will lead to friction between the military and the media. Any form of censorship detracts from the media's principles of providing unedited news coverage of events as they happen. However, a balance is required and the introduction of a short delay in transmission to allow for screening of breaches in operational security is an easy and sure way to fix the problem. The media will need to respect the military's requirement for operational security during combat operations. Variable censorship will give the media all of the pictures and reports they want, albeit with a slight delay, unaltered in any way, but in the knowledge that the reports have been screened to remove security breaches, safeguarding the lives of soldiers to a greater degree. Certainly, the media would not wish to compromise operational security and this solution may be the answer, a compromise that satisfies both the military and the media.

In the final analysis, media is about business, not truth.⁶⁰

John Haslett Cuff
6 May 1993

History has shown that both the media and recent media technology have had dramatic effects on the shape of the modern battlefield and the way in which today's military conducts its current operations. Before the era of live television, breaches in operational security caused by the media were unusual due to the interval between the event occurring on the battlefield and the report being published. Very rarely could the

⁶⁰ John Robert Colombo, *Famous Lasting Words* (Vancouver / Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2000), 323.

enemy use a report from the front to gain an advantage. However, in the last fifteen years, rapid advances in technology have enabled the media to broadcast images and reports live from the battlefield to a worldwide audience from anywhere in the world, in any weather and at any time of day. The ability to broadcast live pictures has brought with it unprecedented viewing figures resulting in the growth of news companies into major news networks. By contrast, the military views live television broadcast of the battlefield as a potential danger to the conduct of its operations due to possibility of leaks in information resulting in breaches of operational security.

It is clear that the military and the media have yet to find a universal solution to this problem that allows adequate press access whilst ensuring that operational security is maintained. Nevertheless, as illustrated by the two examples during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM detailed in this paper, the simple fact remains that breaches in operational security during live television broadcast continue to jeopardise military operations. As a result, the military must take steps to ensure that the lives of its soldiers are not put at risk unnecessarily. Therefore, a form of censorship must be enforced when the situation on the battlefield demands it.

The introduction of a short delay in transmission of live pictures in situations where operational security could be at risk would enable necessary screening and subsequent removal of any footage construed as breaching operational security. The delay would make no difference to the viewing public's enjoyment of the coverage. However, a delay would minimise the disadvantages of live reporting such as emotional strain of reporters during battle, as well as enabling critical analysis of the action taking

place to put the individual battle scenes into the context of where they sit in the overall scheme of events.

On balance, there are more hazards in live coverage from a battlefield than benefits. There is no doubt that media covering operations live from the battlefield have the potential to jeopardise operational security. It has happened in the past and will certainly happen again in the future. Live television will continue to play a part in future military operations. As technology improves, the media will become more mobile on the battlefield and be able to beam back better quality images direct into the living rooms of millions of viewers worldwide.

In a future war, where nation's vital interests are at risk, governments and the military will have to take action to limit live coverage on the battlefield to preserve national will. Although this may not be the case during a humanitarian or peace-support operation, or even for a small or medium scale war against a weak opponent, it may well be the case for a future large-scale war against a competent opponent. Although live television is an interesting and useful means of relating news, it is not essential.

The bottom line is that soldier's lives depend on operational security. When it comes to operational security there is no compromise. Live television remains an interesting tool when used in the right location at the right time. However, it is not essential and should not be used without thought in all situations. Operational security must always come first.

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