

From war journalism to peace journalism: A theoretical perspective

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Abstract

This article analyzes the transformation of War journalism over the years and focuses on some of the major war events namely the Gulf war of 1990-1991, the Kosovo conflict, the Afghanistan war and the Iraq war of 2003. By presenting an overview of the recent studies conducted in the field of war journalism, the paper explores major trends within this field. The study reveals that media played a biased role in recent wars by maneuvering the findings of civilian damage and hiding the facts from the battle ground and thus it seems to serve as a state's tool in transmitting propaganda messages.

Keywords: *War journalism; Peace journalism; Gulf war*

Introduction

Media has made wars like events and spectacles happening before our own eyes. Due to electronic colonialism, technologically-equipped-media have now become the center of attention in today's globally connected world. These technological innovations have enabled today's media to gain a prominent position during wars as they have the opportunity to report on on-going wars right from the battlefield. This technologically-equipped media have advantages and disadvantages as well: its special power of influencing has enhanced the propaganda pressure on war-covering journalists. From military point of view, media has transformed into a fourth branch of service or a fifth column either (Nohrstedt, 2009). According to Nohrstedt, during Gulf war, Commander Norman Schwarzkopf and his public affairs officers made a conscious effort to spread the image of a high-tech war without innocent victims at the press conference. Nohrstedt (2009)

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cites Gerbner, 1992; Kellner, 1992; Paletz, 1994) and argues that the advancement in technology has actually allowed CNN team fronted by Peter Arnett to report the actual happenings of war. The account of ammunition flashing over the sky in Iraqi capital, cruise missiles hovering over the city, howling sounds of sirens and videos of missiles being fired from the Persian Gulf were aired on CNN. The visual material on the media displayed the image of a clinical war fought by the Coalition, who were earlier claiming to use smart bombs for surgical precautions and minimizing civilian damage during the attack. As the gulf war gave repute to CNN, on the contrary, it also influenced other media giants of the world to initiate more modern media outlets for the concrete and live coverage of wars. The launch of Al-Jazeera television is also among those initiatives that enabled Muslim world to get a clearer and objective coverage of wars going on in middle-east as well as in Afghanistan. Few writers like Liebes and Kampf (2004) believe that Al-Jazeera television as an international media organization got prominence because many other enormous teams of correspondents were spread around the far-flung combating zones of the world to cover the U.S. led war on terror in Afghanistan and Iraq.

An overview of theories used

Studying war journalism and its transformation over the years, scholars have used different theories for carrying out research for the topic. However the most prominent ones are framing theory, propaganda theory, and peace journalism theory.

According to Entman (1993), framing basically involves selection and salience, he defined framing as to “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described”. Dimitrova and Strömbäck (2005) applied the framing theory to look at how the Swedish and American elite newspapers framed the Iraq war 2003. The results showed vast differences between the two countries. The US used the military conflict frame in their coverage of the war while the Swedish media used the responsibility and anti-war protest frames. Both newspapers offered human interest stories and media self-references.

Again Dimitrova and Connolly-Ahern (2007) used framing approach to examine how Iraq war was framed by prestigious

news websites of United States, United Kingdom, Egypt and Qatar so as to see how the media coverage was framed during this war and which voices were heard and which were not heard. The results revealed that each international media outlet portrayed war in a different way from the other media corporations as per the perception of war being generated in the respective country. The major findings suggest that the frames used by Arab online news media were military conflict and violence, while coalition media were focusing on reconstruction of Iraq.

Youssef (2009) states that majority of scholars who try to define propaganda suggest that the practice involves mass suggestion and influence. He goes on to identify the leading proponents of this tradition: Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell (1992); Philip Taylor (1992); Richard Taylor (1998); Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson (2001). These scholars agree that, "Propagandists, diligently manipulate symbols, images, and slogans to effectively influence the psychology of their target audience with the goal of persuading them to adopt a specific viewpoint. This definition suggests that propagandists engage in message production with a conscious intention to persuade a specific audience."

According to Herman & Chomsky (1988) as cited in Nohrstedt (2009), war propaganda by media involves the use of worthy and unworthy frame. The worthy victims of wars are those whose sufferings are made visible in the media, and this leads to provoking sympathy for them from the public. The unworthy victims' sufferings are not covered by media and the world fails to learn about them.

In their comparative study of four countries, Greece, Norway, Sweden and the UK, Nohrstedt, Kaitatzi-Whitlock, Ottosen & Riegert (2000) used propaganda framework to look into the media coverage of the first three days of the NATO air strikes in Kosovo as well as to investigate to what degree was the propaganda of President Clinton visible in the European coverage of the conflict and to what extent was this opposed and criticized?

Youssef (2009) conducted a study and analyzed how CNN and Aljazeera websites constructed narratives about Iraqi civilian casualties. Using Cunningham's (2002) propaganda model as a starting point of the analyses, the study revealed that propagandistic messages were delivered by the two leading news

media organization (under examination in the study), while reporting about civilian damages during the war. The CNN and Aljazeera were found involved in the propaganda to create uniformity while reporting about civilian fatalities. News reports regarding civilian damage were manipulated with what society would accept and expect. Reporting victims in a socially accepted frame functioned as a compromise for the journalists between their journalistic duties and as members of their respective societies. Therefore society and culture of the two media outlets influenced the media reporting of the 2003 Iraq war.

Hackett (2006) wrote about Johan Galtung's model of peace journalism. As cited in Galtung (2002, pp. 261-70), the model includes two main approaches with four main points of contrast of war journalism: violence-orientated, propaganda-orientated, elite-orientated and victory-orientated. Therefore, there is a potential for war journalism to play a part in the contribution of escalating conflicts by reproducing propaganda and promoting war. The peace journalism model on the other hand, promotes morality and ethics in war reporting. It acknowledges the fact that the media themselves play a role in the propaganda war. It presents a conscious choice: to identify other options for the readers/viewers by offering a solution-orientated, people-orientated and truth-orientated approach. This, in turn, implies a focus on possible suggestions for peace that the parties to the conflict might have an interest in hiding. However among the criticisms that this theory is facing is how successful will it prove to be when put in practice. In his study, Hackett (2006) uses three models, propaganda model, hierarchy of influence model and the Journalism as a field model to identify the tasks, challenges and possible strategies for the peace journalism movement.

Ottosen (2010), however, endorses in favor of peace journalism theory. He is of the view that this theory can play a vital role in research-building in the field of war and peace journalism besides critically reviewing the scholarly debate on it. Quoting examples from Norwegian media coverage of the war in Afghanistan, Ottosen argues that Galtung's theory on peace journalism can also serve as a suitable teaching material for journalism training of war journalists.

An overview of methods used

The most common methodology used in the research of war

journalism is the quantitative content analysis of case studies; however there are some scholars engaged in some comparative studies. Some studies have used interviews mainly to analyze journalists' feedback and sometimes focus groups are used to get the side of the public examined. Never the less single case studies that focus on content analysis are mostly applied in the research on war journalism. Ottosen (2005) used content analysis methodology to study the Norwegian media and its framing for the Afghanistan war against terror. Special emphasis was paid on the Norwegian role in the conflict as it provided support to NATO in fighting this war.

The issues of concern in this study are; how the start of the war covered in the media and in what context was the Norwegian military covered. The content analysis method is used to study the framing of the war coverage in the first week of the conflict, on the first day of the war and some additional articles are analyzed to study the presence of the Norwegian military in news reporting. Nord & Strömbäck (2004) in their study - Reporting More When Knowing Less - A Comparison of Swedish Media Coverage of September 11 and the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq - conducted quantitative content analyses to compare the coverage of the three conflicts in Sweden. The study also examines key factors that influence media while making news decisions. It also focuses on the ability of news media to maintain fair news reporting. The study looks on the three aspects, specifically at the sources that are used, the occurrence of events and whether the news coverage was against Muslims or against Americans.

Another study on Iraq war conducted by Youssef (2009) analyzed news reporting on Iraqi casualties on both CNN and Aljazeera. The Iraq war was a very important and popular international conflict, scholars have been curious about the media coverage of this war and so many studies have been published on it. However, there is not so much research done yet for comparing how this war was covered in different countries. That is quite unfortunate because rather than single-nation studies, comparative studies have the potential to provide a bigger picture of events happened in past. It also enhances the understanding of one's own country by placing its familiar characteristics against those of other systems. Moreover, it could also answer the questions regarding the way media coverage in a country is affected or influenced by several internal/external factors.

In an attempt to fill this gap in comparative media studies of the war in Iraq, Dimitrova and Strömbäck (2005) in their study titled, *“Mission accomplished? Framing of the Iraq War in the Elite Newspapers in Sweden and the United States”* used the quantitative content analysis method on a comparative level. Newspapers of two countries were coded on how they framed the coverage of the war.

Höijer, Nohrstedt and Ottosen (2002) in their study *“The Kosovo War in the Media Analysis of a Global Discursive Order”* examined how Kosovo war was covered in the media of Sweden, Norway and UK. They evaluated the entire communication process from sender and message to the receiver. Hence, interviews were carried out with the journalists who covered this war in press, radio and television. The journalistic products, i.e. the media coverage of the war, were analyzed by using quantitative and qualitative textual examining method and the audience response was studied by focus groups.

Findings

The Gulf war is often referred to as a propaganda success from the side of the US military (Höijer, Nohrstedt, & Ottosen, 2002). Nohrstedt (2009) agrees with this conclusion by saying that the media was completely deceived on the reporting of this war. This is because the goal of the US military was to convey an image of a “clinical war” which according to them is a high-tech war that doesn’t include casualties. Video images were screened for the correspondents during press conferences held by the US military PR team. But in reality there was never a clinical war, but death of tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians. Therefore to the rest of the world these deaths were not visible.

According to a study by Höijer, Nohrstedt and Ottosen (2002), the media coverage of the Kosovo conflict showed some traces of objective war journalism despite the efforts of NATO and the USA military campaigns to manipulate the media again as they did during the Gulf war. Therefore compared to the Gulf war, Kosovo war was reported differently in the media. The journalist this time had an access to the victims of the war. The media were able to show the sufferings of the innocent victims also known as the “true face” of the war. However, even in this regard to some extent the media was still biased with the NATO propaganda which was against the Kosovo-Serbs. This brings us to another important finding of the media coverage of the Kosovo

war, which was the description of the “worthy victims” within the reporting of the war. In the beginning of the war, Kosovo-Albanians were framed as the only worthy victims of sympathy from the public. However, as war continued reporters managed to shift from this bias and gradually Kosovo-Serbs were also reported as war victims worthy of sympathy as well. This was a big step for media journalism to get away from the NATO’s propaganda and report a balanced picture of the war.

As Kumar (2006) identifies that, among the major findings of the Iraq war is that media coverage favored the Bush administration before and after the war. However these findings are focusing just on US media outlets, Nohrstedt and Ottosen argue that outside the USA, the Bush accusations against Iraq possession of weapons of mass destruction were challenged in the media before and after the war. Such media are European media, media in the Arab and the Third World countries. These media claimed that accusations against Iraq were fabricated as a campaign for war propaganda, and not for the safety of the Iraqi people or the world at large.

Tehrani (2002) has highlighted the dependency of world’s media on state and corporate organization, which, plays an evident role in portraying the negative image of others. McChesney (2002) has also criticized the role of media in generating collateral support to U.S. for war, like in case of U.S. led war on terror in Afghanistan and later on its invasion on Iraq. When these writers consider media as a state or elite tool for their contrary agendas, other rejects it for their role of establishing terrorists. Liebes and Kampf (2004) are of the view that transformation in modern media system after 9/11 attacks, have raised the status terrorists to heroes or superstars. They also blame “Al-Jazeera television for supporting terrorists during wars.

Hackett (2006) believes that news media by using state propaganda about accessing extremists and opting different tactics often escalate conflict rather than going for peaceful options. Thus, conventional and objective reporting of conflict too often leads to “war journalism.” According to Nohrstedt (2009) if there is something that especially characterizes war journalism in the new wars, it is the deadly threat directed ‘in the name of democracy’ both against the humanitarian idea of the equal value of all people, and against freedom of speech. That is why the idea of peace journalism also developed. Kempf (2002) stated that

conceptualizing peace journalism is closely related to good journalism that does not initiate war propaganda.

Recent trends in war journalism

The transformation of war journalism is currently facing the following trends: first & foremost are the most popular techniques of the US military known as embedded reporting. This trend was more prominent in the 2003 Iraq war, when reporters were welcomed to accompany the military troops in the field (Nohrsteidt, 2009). The trend brought immediacy into the reporting war news however the problem of bias is unavoidable when the media and one party of the conflict form a bond during the war.

The CNN effect is another common trend in the recent transformation of war journalism. As (Gilboa, 2005) states in his article "The CNN effect: The search for a communication theory of international relations," the theory can be summarized as televised images, especially heart-wrenching pictures of civilians' sufferings will so stir public opinion that government officials will be forced to adjust policy to conform to that opinion.

War journalism is gaining more space in the media; this is due to the fact that the media is a target of manipulative propaganda strategies of the involved parties of the wars. Journalist and reporters have adopted a self-critical strategy and encourage readers and viewers to questions what they read (Nohrsteidt, 2009). The media reporting of war journalism is on the trend of giving major attention on the civilian victims. This is when the public get the chance to witness the "true face" of the war (Höijer, Nohrstedt & Ottosen, 2002).

The leading trend in war journalism is the 24 hour news production. With developed technology, speedy process of news publishing/telecasting and the internet has allowed the frequent news updates on websites. Competition is high among media outlets and war reporters. However this trend has its negative effects as well, the demand of instant news sometimes forces journalist to produce news of low quality, and full of speculations, degrading the sources (Nord & Strömbäck, 2004).

Conclusion

It is really difficult to conclude that the role played by media in the recent wars was based on adequate principles of professional

journalism ethics and objectivity since several research scholars are curious about media role in manipulating facts and shaping propaganda for their respective states. By looking into the theories and findings elaborated above, it can be concluded that media have played a biased role in recent wars by maneuvering the findings of civilian damage and hiding the facts from the battle ground. That is the reason, some academic scholars have blamed media organizations for serving as state's tool in transmitting propaganda messages while changing public perception on actual happenings and causes of war.

However, there is still a need of much research in this field because of the lack of academic studies done so far. Since majority of researches featuring war journalism are based on case studies and accounts of journalists while there is lack of comprehensive theories present in this regard. Therefore, future scholars should initiate some major theories so that a compact and vast understanding of this trend could be ascertained. Future studies should also question the role of media as a state actor as well as its role in flourishing/glamorizing terrorists should also be deeply investigated.

There is room for improvement in the theory of CNN effect as stated by Gilboa (2005). Studies of the CNN effect have so far only focused on the subject of government policymaking processes during conflicts and wars, but clearly international media have effects on other major areas of governance such as economy, culture, health, environment etc.

Peace journalism theory is another theory that needs to be given much attention from scholars, more research studies are required to be conducted to clarify how this theory can be put into action and used as a sustainable theory in the field of war and peace journalism.

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