Kylie Tuosto's "The ‘Grunt Truth’ of Embedded Reporting” has its origin in a deceptively simple pun: journalists “embed” themselves with military units in order to report on the experience of war. As Kylie demonstrates, however, this term also "helps illuminate the transgressive and incestuous quality of the media-military relationship.” Her intellectual curiosity and sensitivity to the multivalent qualities of language combined to transform this detail into a fascinating argument about the challenges of war correspondence, the nature of journalistic subjectivity, the sensationalization of news, and the problematic relationship between American news media and the government and military.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of Kylie’s work is the originality and sophistication of her argument. She articulates a methodological approach to understanding the biases at work in war correspondence by identifying and discussing personal experience bias, reader-response bias, editorial bias, and sacrificial bias. Ultimately, Kylie uses these analyses “to suggest more broadly that the effect of embedded reporting on the American public is distraction of and desensitization to war, as well as a perpetuation of American overconfidence in military ability.” She goes on to address both the politics and economics of journalism and war correspondence: the embedded reporter has become, she argues, a heroic icon in the “dramatization of the military experience” which in many ways relies on “the war imagery used in film production.” Embedded reporting thus creates audiences for its “compelling human-interest pieces” that distract people from the essential developments of war. Like all good scholarship, Kylie’s work poses difficult questions to readers and to herself; as her instructor, I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to work with her as she explored them.

Kylie develops her argument by drawing on an astonishingly diverse range of sources. She engages with government documents, scholarly journals, periodicals, documentaries, radio shows, television interviews, and journalism websites. For many writers, such a wealth of material would become unwieldy. Kylie, however, remains in control of her ideas, research, and prose. Her argument is multilayered and complex, but her style throughout the essay is accessible and clear. Consider, for example, the lucidity and the force of the following passage: “What we are beginning to see with embedded reporting is a de-secularization of American enterprise in favor of an increasing fictionalization, militarization, and politicization. Where once we were looking to the first amendment to separate the powers of media and government … we are now allowing the media and military to become accomplices in the creation of a Hollywood-esque dramatization of war in Iraq used to propagate pro-war sentiment at home as well as justify America’s presence in overseas conflict.” Even at her most critically astute and powerful moments, she is deliberate and restrained.
Kylie is an accomplished writer with a sophisticated mind. Helping her articulate, develop, and polish her ideas about the problems of embedded reporting and war correspondence was a rewarding experience for me. The curiosity and enthusiasm with which she approached both her work and my course were extraordinary.

— Ryan Zurowski
The “Grunt Truth” of Embedded Journalism

Kylie Tuosto

“We didn’t want to be in bed with the military, but we certainly wanted to be there.”
– Marjorie Miller, editor for the Los Angeles Times

American journalism generally connotes three things: freedom of the press, yellow journalism, and sensationalism in the news. With the current war in Iraq, we can now add “embedded reporting” to the list of terms coined and used to represent both the cooperation and the mistrust between the American government and the American news media. In times of war, there is a delicate balance between government censorship of war correspondence and the right of the press to produce unregulated news. In essence, both rely on each other for propagation of war sentiment, and both have the power to destroy the other’s credibility with the American public. As Naval Reserve Commander Jose L. Rodriguez puts it, it is “a mix of cooperation and tension” (Rodriguez).

In Vietnam, the lack of an official declaration of war prevented the U.S. military from making any formal regulations, and thus it was forced to request that correspondents practice voluntary censorship. In 1971, to control the media, the military created the Wartime Information Security Program, which quickly became obsolete as technology developed and there was no longer a need for field censorship. Without a formal contract between the military and the press, correspondents reported critically on the effectiveness of U.S. intervention. Editors at home, however, reflected only military reports of success in Vietnam, and while some newspapers criticized military tactics, few, if any, questioned U.S. policy. In 1968, however, the Tet Offensive changed the media’s perspective on war, and as American troops began to lose significant battles for the first time, the public and press began to challenge America’s decision to continue to fight in Vietnam. Ultimately, as journalists began reporting on the futility of sending more troops, the military began to blame the press for lack of pro-war sentiment and, ultimately, for the stalemate of the war. Similarly, the press blamed the military for lying about the situation in Vietnam and trying to mislead the public. The mistrust between the military and the media that was established in Vietnam is a sentiment that continues to be felt by both sides today (Newseum).

The military in the first Gulf War was able to effectively control press access in response to mistrust during Vietnam. Though the media now had high-tech tools at their disposal, the military could regulate what they could see and what they were told. The military then established a pooling system in which a small group of journalists covered an event for the entire press corps. This system, however, encountered several problems such as lack of cooperation, in-fighting, and the struggle between the needs of different media outlets (Newseum).
In the current war in Iraq, the media and military continue to look for a balance between censorship and a free press. Whether to alleviate tension or to gain political and militaristic control, the Pentagon has decided to be proactive about setting up a safe means for the media to report on the war in Iraq. Unlike previous attempts to keep the press away from the battlefield, the Pentagon has now established a system of “embedded” reporters in which “a media embed is defined as a media representative remaining with a unit on an extended basis – perhaps a period of weeks or even months” (“Public Affairs…”). In contrast, the term “unilateral” defines any un-embedded journalists who are not associated with a military unit, but are independent journalists, freelance journalists, or journalists associated with a media organization. According to the ground rules established in an official, unclassified government report from 2003, the purpose of embedding the media is “to facilitate maximum, in-depth coverage of U.S. forces in combat and related operations” (“Public Affairs…” Sec 2.C.). However, policy 2.A. of this document reveals a military interest not only in in-depth coverage, but in public perception:

Media coverage of any future operation will, to a large extent, shape public perception of the national security environment now and in the years ahead. This holds true for the U.S. public; the public in allied countries whose opinion can affect the durability of our coalition; and publics in countries where we conduct operations, whose perceptions of us can affect the cost and duration of our involvement (“Public Affairs…” Sec 2.A.).

This declaration of strong U.S. Military interest in public perception of war reveals a) an obsession with the interaction between media and military, and b) a dedication of both sides to cooperate in order to “tell the factual story—good or bad—before others seed the media with disinformation and distortions, as they most certainly will continue to do” (“Public Affairs…” Sec 2.A.). Both the media and military claim to strive for truth and fact: “[T]he public demands objectivity and journalists strive to achieve it, even though critics say they miss the mark. Even if the traditional notion of objectivity as an absolute standard is often unattainable, to abandon the concept altogether would open the door to undisciplined, irresponsible journalism” (Fox). And in order to effectively and efficiently relay the factual story, the Pentagon has chosen to embed media representatives, a practice which, while appearing to be a perfect solution to the unsolved problem of unbiased and in-depth war correspondence, creates several unprecedented difficulties for both journalists and their readers.

The argument I will develop here is two-fold. First, I will argue that embedded war correspondence magnifies four specific types of bias inherent in all journalism: personal experience bias, reader-response bias, editorial bias, and sacrificial bias. I will then use this analysis of the limitations of objectivity to suggest more broadly that the effect of embedded reporting on the American public is a distraction of and desensitization to war, as well as a perpetuation of American overconfidence in military ability. Moreover, as the sexual tension inherent in the word “embed” implies, the intimate nature of the media-military relationship is fundamentally incestuous, insofar as it is an illicit transgression of the principle of freedom of the press. Though it attempts to propagate pro-war sentiment and alleviate American apathy, embedded reporting has actually given birth to an unprecedented hyper-dramatization of war.
“Experience is one thing you can’t get for nothing.”

Personal Experience Bias in the American News Media

Every journalist begins a story or an investigation with a predisposition to the topic. Whether it is his childhood fear of heights or her being a woman, the journalist carries a vast number of life experiences that shape not only his or her view of the world, but the story he or she is covering. In addition, such life experiences contribute to a multiplicity of viewpoints from which the same story, the same unbiased truth, might be written. We might otherwise disregard the effects of such bias, as it cannot easily be alleviated, if it were not for the fact that war correspondence dramatically magnifies personal experience bias. Under war conditions, in which life is at risk and the fear of death is insurmountable, human emotional response inevitably determines a journalist’s experience. This emotion does not necessarily translate into an emotionally appealing story, but, rather, exemplifies the extent to which a war correspondent’s previous life experiences affect his reporting.

In the case of embedded reporters, I am particularly concerned with three demographics: veteran status, nationality, and gender. All of these strongly contribute to diversely biased stories. Previous military experience, be it in Vietnam, the first Gulf War, or in the current war in Iraq, can create a strong sense of camaraderie with the troops, which can, in turn, strongly affect the tone, rhetoric, and even content of a journalist’s story. Nationality plays a large role in reporting on the war in Iraq for several reasons: not only do the citizens of most European countries look unfavorably upon American involvement in Iraq (Gallego), but their reporters are also less likely to gain authorization to embed with American troops. American journalists have a monopoly over the embedding market, causing resentment among non-American reporters and implying that a relatively univocal view of the war emerges. Finally, a journalist’s gender has a profound impact not only on the way he or she perceives the emotional turbulence of war, but also on the rhetoric he or she uses to describe the conflict. While there are an unlimited number of demographics and personal experiences that affect reporting, embedded journalism significantly magnifies veteran status, nationality, and gender; by exploring the effect of each, we can better understand the role of personal experience bias in war correspondence.

Journalists who are war veterans seem automatically predisposed to a sympathy for and camaraderie with their colleagues. This predisposition causes not only a predetermined bias towards their units, but also affects the rhetoric and content of their stories. In order to see the effect of veteran status, we can compare the stories of Michael Fumento, veteran of 27th Engineer Battalion, Gordon Dillow, former Army sergeant in Vietnam, and Mercedes Gallego, a non-veteran Spanish reporter. Quickly, we recognize the difference in content. Both Fumento and Dillow focus their reports on either soldier human interest or combat, while Gallego is forced to write a first person account of her own experiences because she lacks a military background.

In Fumento’s article, “The New Band of Brothers,” his bias immediately becomes apparent as he writes, “I preferred to be with the 82nd Airborne—which had only recently arrived and which is my old sister unit[...].” Fumento’s language of possession and intimacy reveals his inherent predisposition towards a fondness for the soldiers of his
new unit (Fumento). His recent war experience not only predetermines a natural affection for his troops, but causes a unique lack of scope associated with his narrow-minded fixation on one set of soldiers with whom he shares common ground, his old sister unit. Dillow’s article, on the other hand, presents another problem associated with veteran status. As a veteran, Dillow understands the pressures of war and the threat of death and, as such, is not only predisposed to camaraderie, but is inherently protective of the young men with whom he is embedded. This protectiveness takes the form of content filtering, as Dillow admittedly makes the marines sound “much more like choirboys…than they really are” by censoring expletives and roguish humor; he knows that, unlike himself, the people back home cannot and will not understand the crude nature of soldiers fearing for their lives. “I’d been an Army sergeant in Vietnam, an ancient, almost mythical war to the grunts, most of whom are nineteen or twenty.” Here Dillow assumes a paternal role, feeling obligated to put his story “in the context of sweet-faced, All-American boys,” in order to sanitize the truth for the naive, yet critical, American public. As veterans, both Dillow and Fumento have this in common: their stories inherently lack objectivity because each veteran possesses such an in-depth understanding of and vested interest in his subject. Consequently, neither can differentiate between personal experience and an objective eye-witness account of events.

In contrast, non-veteran Mercedes Gallego has to compensate for her lack of understanding of the subject. Without war experience, she seems baffled by the realities of war and, as a result, can only report on what she feels and how she reacts to a given situation. Thus her reader is left not with an eye-witness account of events, but minimally factual and unduly emotional piece of reporting. Both lack and excess stem from her inability to comprehend the soldier’s story. In addition to her non-veteran status, Gallego’s internalization of war experience is supplemented by both her gender and nationality. “On the day he [a fellow journalist] was killed,” she recalls, “I spent the night crying until I fell asleep.” Gallego then continues to discuss the hardships of sleeping on the ground and writing on paper rather than a laptop: “It’s very tough though because you’re not in a hotel and personally, I was always more worried about losing a leg or something like that than being killed.” She goes on to discuss car bombings and shootings, all of which were anecdotes of extremely dangerous situations, in an attempt to elicit sympathy from her readers. “For women, this was a tough place anyway,” she says as she introduces her story. Gallego not only calls attention to the fact that she has no war experience, but attempts to gain even more sympathy from her readers for her status as a female journalist. Not surprisingly, this strips her article of much objective credibility, weakens her authority, and places her story among the hundreds of human-interest pieces looking to elicit the same emotional reader response—demanding pity for embeds, rather than for soldiers.

As an embed associated with the press in Spain, Gallego’s nationality is also a factor contributing to her overall bias. Unlike Fumento and Dillow, who as Americans are more likely to glorify the American soldier, Gallego and Canadian correspondent Paul Workman respond quite differently to the use of embedded reporters. “Spain had the largest anti-war sentiment of any country in Europe—ninety-one percent of the population was against this war—and so it did affect my coverage,” writes Gallego, who admits she approaches the subject with a disapproval of American involvement in Iraq (Gallego). Workman, a non-embedded Canadian correspondent, criticizes both American involvement and the unfair use of embedded reporters. “The embedded
journalists… sound like cheerleaders,” writes Workman. “There is no question the pictures coming out of the war zone are spectacular, the red, swirling sandstorms in the western desert, the tanks and armored vehicles shooting their way into the heart of Baghdad,” he says of the embeds’ ability to create wonderfully dramatic war images. However, “Americans have succeeded in reducing independent reporting of the war. You’re more likely to see a glorified view of American power and morality, in a war that much of the world considers unnecessary, unjustified and just plain wrong…” (Workman). Workman’s point is an insightful one. Not only do European reporters like Gallego harbor distaste for and are subsequently biased against the American military, but other non-American reporters like Workman point out that even being an American embed causes an inherent nationalist bias in support of American troops. Not without his own faults, however, Workman admits that his criticism of embeds is biased as well, since his is just “the humble opinion of one frustrated, ‘un-embedded’ reporter.” Workman’s bitterness towards embeds, Fumento’s desire to embed with former units, Dillow’s intimacy with and protectiveness of his marine grunts, and Gallego’s emotional appeal to self-pity all contribute to a skewed perception of war reality established through the convolution of journalists’ previous personal experiences.

“There are no facts, only interpretations.”

Reader-Response Bias in the American News Media

Journalism is not simply investigative reporting for the sake of finding truth; it is a capitalist enterprise with a market and consumers to which it must cater. Based on a newspaper’s, magazine’s, or television station’s audience, a reporter will alter content as well as rhetoric in order to best serve that audience’s needs. In war correspondence, then, considering audience means a journalist will inevitably censor the reality of war at his/her discretion. War correspondence is particularly conducive to censorship not only because it exposes the arguably naïve American public to the brutality and ruthlessness of war, but also because the families of soldiers have a right to learn of their loved one’s death in a respectful, tactful, and formal way. This means that embeds not only practice self-censorship, but also receive limited information and are denied intimate details for the sake of secrecy and military strategy. Because “unit commanders may impose temporary restrictions on electronic transmissions for operational security reasons,” (“Public Affairs…” Sec 2.C.) an additional layer of censorship evolves, which is essentially out of journalists’ control. Similarly, the bias inherent in an embed’s inability to see the larger picture of war contributes to a stratified filter of information which exemplifies the limitation inherent not only in the biases explored here, but in the restrictions placed on embeds as well. Despite necessary militaristic regulations, journalists, wary of their audience and public opinion, practice self-censorship; this constitutes not only an inherent lack of objectivity, but also serves to create a fabricated version of reality.

Ultimately, self-censorship distorts reality by depending on the eyes of the reporter, which diminishes the truth-value of the reporting itself. Embedded war correspondent Gordon Dillow writes, “The discomforts and dangers of the war were easily dealt with; accurately conveying the reality of it to the readers back home was not.” He continues
to justify his lack of objectivity by rationalizing that omitting soldiers’ routine expletives “was unavoidable” and that “it wouldn’t fly in a family newspaper [and] neither would the constant jokes about sex and bodily functions.” Dillow’s article reveals not only his paternal over-protectiveness, but also demonstrates a level of censorship that eventually leads him to equate military personnel to singing schoolchildren: “The result was that the marines sounded much more like choirboys in my stories than they really are.” While he concedes the point that his stories did not accurately convey reality, he also claims, “I didn’t hide anything. For example, when some of my marines fired up a civilian vehicle that was bearing down on them, killing three unarmed Iraqi men, I reported it—but I didn’t lead my story with it, and I was careful to put it in the context of scared young men trying to protect themselves…and sweet-faced, all-American boys hardened by a war that wasn’t of their making.” Dillow’s strong connection with his soldiers, as well as the fact that “some things are simply too gruesome to describe in detail,” allows him to take liberties with censorship, writing only what he deems necessary and proper for a family audience. The problem thus becomes an inherent lack of objectivity that is paradoxically disguised by Dillow’s openness and honesty with his reader: in admitting a lack of objectivity, Dillow gains credibility with his reader, who might then mistake his honesty for a truth-value that his story largely lacks.

Dillow’s argument is in itself a contradiction, as he states that he both omits nothing and censors expletives and gruesome details for a family audience. This paradox emphasizes the fact that his reporting is in no way representative of objective truth; this is not to say, of course, that his article does not contain truth. In fact, he states that “the point wasn’t that I wasn’t reporting the truth; the point was that I was reporting the marine grunt truth—which had also become my truth” (Dillow). With respect to the reader-response bias, we find that his “marine grunt truth” is in fact the “marine-grunt-truth-as-is-appropriate-for-an-American-family-audience.” Dillow’s blanket justification for a lack of fact-based truth and his hasty relativization of truth opens the door to irresponsible journalism. If journalists abandon the pursuit of objective truth in favor of relativized truths grounded in personal experience and edited for audience consumption, then who will provide the audience with that necessary degree of objectivity? The question, then, quickly becomes one of truth value in which truth is measured by an arbitrary and subjective gradient. It is unreasonable and illogical merely to generate truth labels in order to compensate for a lack of fact-based truth value in one’s reporting.

Dillow’s obligation to objectivity forces him to fabricate not necessarily a story, but a truth value, for the sake of catering to an audience which only wants to hear the censored “marine grunt truth.” This suggests that the opinion and naïveté of the American public have a strong effect on how accurately the war is portrayed: journalists’ self-censorship for the sake of catering to an audience skews the necessary reality of a story, making it subjective to and reliant on the people who, in reality, know nothing of the war itself. Embeds, however, are not the only ones attempting to cater to war sentiment at home. News media editors must also take into account the reaction of the American public and, as such, impose their own opinions on the stories received from embeds. Editors alter both content and scope in the hope of providing what they feel to be a larger and more balanced perspective.
“There is more than one way to burn a book.”

Editorial Bias in the American News Media

All journalists must be wary of the opinion of their editors because they are employed by and accountable to someone. This is important in political journalism, where reporters must be cautious of how their own political views measure up to those of their editors. War correspondence, however, has an entirely different effect on the reporter-editor dynamic. With the advent of technologies like satellite-phones and lightning-speed digital imagery, war reporting in Iraq not only produces real-time correspondence, but a large volume of information which, for many media outlets, is sent home to editors and rewrites before it is presented to the American public. Both the relative speed of relayed information and the use of rewrites create an unprecedented problem of convoluted subjectivity.

In a panel discussion called “The LA Times Goes to War,” Marjorie Miller, editor of The Los Angeles Times, speaks to the success and value of embeds as well as to the responsibility of editors in organizing their information. “The embeds,” she says, “were valuable as mosaic pieces. But they could only see as far as they could see and it was up to Tracy and Tyler [rewrites] to begin the process of putting some of those little pieces of the puzzle into perspective” (Miller). While the initial purpose of embeds was to provide up-close and personal war coverage, the media seem to rely still on two second-hand observers sitting in their comfortable L.A. office chairs both to rewrite stories and to put them into perspective. Unlike past wars, in which correspondence was telegraphed from military commanders, we now rely heavily on American citizens, who have not experienced war at all, to relay valuable information to the American public. In the case of embedded correspondence, as information is relayed in real-time, the use of rewrites is comparable to having embeds jot down notes and send them several thousand miles away to be written into a story and then fed to the American public. Clearly, liberties are taken with the information relayed through embedded reporters—liberties that are rather deceptively represented as an unavoidable balancing act. As Miller states, “What you were getting from the military, from Iraq, from allied countries, from other unallied countries was going into a main bar in L.A. And we were trying to balance the relative weight of all of that information” (Miller). This approach may attempt to cover all ground as objectively as possible, but the mere use of a central editing hub narrows the scope of all incoming correspondence and filters it through the eyes of L.A. Times editors like Marjorie Miller, a process that introduces significant problems of editorial subjectivity.

The politics of war correspondence, however, is not only present in written news media. After all, nationwide polls found that 86% of viewers received their news about war from television (Ewers) and 70% received war news from cable television specifically (Sharkey). From the beginning of the war, television stations tended to choose a particular stance on the conflict and continued to feed each report into an editing filter of patriotism, jingoism, or in rare cases, objectivity. According to Julia Fox and Byungho Park’s statistical analysis of objectivity in embedded war correspondence, of the three largest cable television networks—Fox, CNN, and MSNBC—CNN was “more objective in its coverage of the Iraq War... [and] attempted to bring different viewpoints to viewers with segments such as ‘Voices of Dissent’ and ‘Arab Voices.’” Fox and Park even quote S. Johnson of the Chicago Tribune who “criticized Fox [News] for its subjective
reporting of the war [saying], ‘We deride Fox News Channel for saying “us” and “our” in talking about the American war effort, a strategy that conjures images of gung-ho anchor Shepard Smith, like Slim Pickens in Dr. Strangelove, riding a Tomahawk straight into Baghdad.’” Johnson then continues to criticize rival MSNBC who “like Fox, goes so far as to include a waving U.S. flag on its cluttered screen and to use the government’s official ‘Operation Iraqi Freedom’ as its blanket coverage title” (Fox). Columnist Clarence Page also disapproves of Fox “for embracing the language of the Bush administration in its newscasts. It calls suicide bombers ‘homicide bombers’ and refers to the war to unseat Saddam Hussein as America’s war to ‘liberate Iraq’” (Page). Statistics from viewer polls support these findings, as even viewers say that Fox had a great deal of media bias 43% of the time compared to CNN, for which viewers saw a great deal of media bias only 27% of the time (Fox). These comparisons are only examples of the wide range of bias created by the media editing filter. Simply by watching Fox as opposed to CNN, one is more likely to gain a biased understanding of the war in Iraq; with respect to my argument, the stories fed by embeds are more likely to be altered or skewed by media-editing when editors preemptively choose a particular stance based on politics at home. What we can ultimately gain from an understanding of editorial bias is the relative ease with which an already subjective embed’s story can be made more subjective not only to the opinion of the American public, as is the case with reader-response bias, but the opinion of news media editors in reaction to American politics and domestic war sentiment.

“I may have been recording my own obituary.”

Sacificial Bias in the American News Media

Capitalism drives not only a need to sell any story at a good price, objective or not, but also the need to get a good story at any price—a price that, in the case of embedded reporters, is often one’s life. While there is a wide array of opinions on the issue, the basic question reporters must face is: are you willing to risk your life to get a story? Thus the question the American public should be asking itself: is the loss of more American lives worth the story? Jane Arraf, CNN’s Senior Baghdad Correspondent and unilateral reporter, says no. In a panel interview with Michael Fumento and Paul Rieckoff on The Al Franken Show, Arraf replies to Fumento’s criticism of unilateralists by saying, “there’s been more than sixty reporters killed. Reporters don’t have to go to Baghdad, take the risk of flying in, being hit by missiles as they’re flying, go on that road to the green zone where they might be blown up. They can easily stay in Jordan…” (“Special Iraq Panel”) Arraf continues to argue that often it is unilateralists who gain a better understanding of the war, as they have the ability to speak Arabic to the Iraqi people and to understand both the experience of Iraqis and the plight of the American military.

But many reporters, like Michael Fumento, believe that risking one’s life is necessary for getting the best story. Of unilateral reporters, Fumento, in his article “Covering Iraq: the Modern Way of War Correspondence,” writes: “If you don’t have the guts actually to cover the war, stand aside for those who do.” His disgust for “hotel-bound credit-claimers,” prominent throughout his article, makes his position abundantly clear. His photo caption, which shows his late editor Michael Kelly, who was killed while embedded in Iraq, reads, “Embeds die in Iraq, not members of the Baghdad Brigade,” referring to the “rear-echelon reporters” otherwise known as unilateralists. “[With] the sole exception of
Steven Vincent, the only American journalists killed or even seriously injured by hostile action in Iraq have been embeds.” Quoting Harry Truman, Fumento writes, “If you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen” (Fumento, “Covering Iraq”). While such impassioned rhetoric reinforces the skewed and opinionated nature of his article, Fumento also writes that when asked where he wanted to be embedded, he replied, “the redder, the better;” claiming a willingness to sacrifice his own life for a story by embedding in the most dangerous war zone available (Fumento, “The New…”).

Unlike Fumento, photographer and journalist Stephanie Sinclair is unsure of her willingness to risk her life for the best pictures. In a recent PBS documentary on embedded journalism titled War Feels like War, Sinclair reflects on the danger of her current situation: “I’m a little wary. I really don’t want to get hurt. It’s just not worth it to me at this point. I don’t really know enough about covering wars or any sort of real violent subject matter.” While she may be unwilling to risk her own life, she certainly does not mind risking the happiness, or in this case sadness, of the grieving Iraqi wife she pushes out of the way in order to take a picture of her dead Iraqi husband:

I can’t imagine people photographing if I was in that situation. That’s what just kills me. If that was like my mother, or my brother or something … It’s asking a lot for us to be there for those moments and be, like, right in the middle of it. I mean, I was in front of her, and it was the only way I could get a picture; otherwise, I couldn’t see, and there’s no point in us being there. And she was just wailing right in my ear, and I felt it throughout my whole body. A lot of journalists tell you [that] you have to block that out, and it’s impossible to not feel something when that’s happening.

While the obligation to her reporting allows her to disregard compassion, Sinclair, who plans on continuing war correspondence for fifteen more years, is still afraid of what she might lose: “I definitely don’t want to go out on my first one. Not only would it be a bad way to die, but it’d be a pretty bad way to be remembered.” Her main concern, then, is not to avoid dying or being shot at, but to avoid being remembered as the photojournalist who died in her first war. Similarly, Polish reporter Jacek Czarnecki of Radio Zet is concerned with how he will be remembered: “Some people do this because they want an exciting life. I don’t know why I do it. But I know I will quit this job sooner or later. I don’t want to be a 53 year old killed reporter.” To Czarnecki, dying is simply not worth the thrill of being a war correspondent.

Photographer Marco Di Lauro of Getty Images, on the other hand, claims that war hardens a reporter. In conversation with Stephanie Sinclair, Di Lauro says that experience in the field will over time change a reporter’s willingness to sacrifice for a story. “You will be ready to kill another photographer for a better picture like everybody else is… [Before coming to Iraq] I was the nicest person in the whole world; now I am the biggest fucker ever. So here I am, ready to kill my mother for a better picture.” Though not all of the reporters featured in War Feels like War were embedded with the military, their experience sheds light on the bias associated with one’s willingness to risk his/her life. The inherent value Sinclair places on her own life causes her to feel compassion for her subjects, but allows greed to overcome any emotion. Conversely, Di Lauro, hardened by war, is willing to sacrifice anything to outdo other reporters, which may or may not help him get a better story.
Like Di Lauro, NBC News Middle East Correspondent Richard Engel thought the war would harden him. And, in a way, it did. But as he prefers to describe it, there are four stages of the embedding process. “Stage 1: I’m invincible. I’m ready. I’m excited. I’m living on adrenaline.” Then as the war begins, Stage 2: “You know what, this is dangerous, I could get hurt over here. And that starts to sink in. Then the war continues and friends start to get kidnapped or killed and you see bodies on the streets.” Stage 3: “I’ve been over here so long, I’m probably going to get hurt. And then at a certain stage, you hit rock bottom and you feel, I’ve used up my time. Stage 4: I’m going to die in this conflict. And that’s a dark place to go into.” And yet, as Engel goes on to reflect upon his five years in Iraq he concludes, “Has it been worth it? All the sacrifice? I think it has” (Engel). But even if the sacrifice is “worth it,” does greater sacrifice necessarily translate into greater success?

A reporter’s willingness to risk his/her life for a story creates problems both on an individual level and for war correspondence as a whole. We might be tempted to think that the more a reporter is willing to sacrifice, the better the story. However, this can mean that a reporter is desensitized to trauma and can no longer relate to the American public on a human-interest level. The reverse can also be true: a reporter willing to sacrifice his life for a story might be overly sensitive to the horrors of war and thus write a story which sensationalizes suffering. In either scenario the amount of risk a reporter is willing to take with his/her life does affect the objectivity of the story and ultimately allows emotion to creep into a human-interest piece as a desire for sympathy and pity – that is, sympathy and pity for the reporter, not for the soldiers. At this point, I am now not only considering how sacrificial bias affects objectivity, but whether the life-risk is ethical and, further, what risking civilian lives reveals about American capitalism with respect to the media. Why are Americans willing to risk more lives, the lives of civilian reporters, in order to experience a vicarious intimacy of war? Is this willingness simply in exchange for national pride and justification for overseas occupation? For that matter, we might include editorial bias to ask this question: why don’t we save ourselves time, money, and lives by having Tracy and Tyler just write the stories from home?

We don’t do it because we are intoxicated by military strength, power, and domination—feelings that manifest themselves in embedded war correspondence. Rather than concerning ourselves with the loss of objectivity, we seem to fixate on technologically-advanced, superior weaponry and the feelings of power it engenders. In his article, “Grunts and Pogues: The Embedded Life,” for example, Dillow recalls the feelings of calm and strength by holding a grenade given to him by one of his marine grunts: “It had been more than thirty years since I’d held a grenade, and I knew that my having it violated written and unwritten rules. Still, it felt comforting in my hand” (Dillow). Clearly, the marines as well as Dillow, in the heat of a struggle, were willing to disregard military regulations for the sake of saving their own lives. If this is the case – that during times of war, when life is at risk, the rules do not apply—then a host of implications can be drawn from the controversy embedded reporting is causing. For example, where exactly can we draw the line between embed and soldier? As colleagues “[who] operate as a part of their assigned unit,” do we expect embeds to take fire for fellow soldiers? (“Public Affairs...” Sec 3.F.) The ground rules say no. But when do the rules actually apply? The result is simply this: when it comes down to life and death, objectivity is not merely impossible; it’s the last thing on anyone’s mind.
"You can’t objectively cover both sides when I’m guarding your butt."

A Military Opinion of Embedded War Correspondence

The media are not the only ones telling the stories of embedded reporters. Both soldiers and veterans of the U.S. Military have their opinions of embeds, and the consensus seems to be a lack of breadth of scope. Dillow’s article, while written about his own experience, provides a unique, second-hand account of the initial skepticism his marine grunts held for embedded reporters:

They had been warned about us, I found out later. Be careful what you say to them, the Marines of Alpha Company were told before we joined them in early March... Don’t bitch about the slow mail delivery, don’t criticize the antiwar protesters back home, don’t discuss operational plans, and for God’s sake, don’t use ethnic slur words for Arabs. Better yet, don’t talk to the reporters at all. They’ll just stab you in the back (Dillow).

To Dillow’s surprise, the marine grunts not only saw embeds as an annoyance and an additional man to cover, but were initially suspicious of Dillow’s loyalties. After getting to know the men of his unit, Dillow explains that “they realized that we weren’t using our Iridium cell phones to alert the Iraqi army high command to the Marine’s next move,” and subsequently Dillow was able to develop both trust and camaraderie with his soldiers. Eventually, the soldiers’ initial mistrust grew into a desire to have their stories told accurately and affectionately to their loved ones at home. To the Marines of the Alpha Company, Dillow’s “marine grunt truth” would suffice (Dillow).

Paul Rieckhoff, an Iraqi war veteran devoted to removing troops from Iraq, however, does not agree that the embeds’ reports are sufficient substitutes for truth. He argues that while embedded reporting sometimes produces useful reporting, the fact is that embeds are not getting the full story. He further suggests that it is impossible for embeds to report objectively when they, like the soldiers, must have a battlefield mentality. Rieckhoff makes this view clear not only in his book Chasing Ghosts: Failures and Facades in Iraq: A Soldier’s Story, but also in a panel discussion along with Michael Fumento and Jane Arraf on The Al Franken Show. Al Franken, the show’s host, quotes Colonel Johnson as having once said, “Every man thinks meanly of himself for not having been a soldier.” To which Franken responds, “Well I don’t.” After some laughter by all three panelists, Rieckhoff speaks up:

But a lot of reporters do. A lot of reporters really covet the experience. And I’m not saying this about you personally. But they like going over there. And they want to get their reporting chops. And we used to call them in the military “jock sniffers.” They wanted to be part of the action. And I’m not saying this of all reporters, but there are some elements of that. And in my opinion, if you’re embedded, you’ve compromised some of your journalistic integrity. You can’t
objectively cover both sides when I’m guarding your butt. And I’ve been there with embedded reporters and I think some of them do a great job. And I think honestly Ms. Arraf you’re doing a wonderful job at CNN, but you’re still only getting one side of it for the most part. You can’t independently operate without U.S. Military protection now. So you’re still only getting a very narrow understanding. And I think most of the people who’ve been there will admit that (“Special Iraq Panel”).

Rieckhoff’s statement sparks heated debate among the other two panelists, Arraf and Fumento, and even Franken, who continues to play devil’s advocate. Franken immediately points out that he thinks the best and bravest reporters are men and women like Jill Carroll and George Packer, “the people who have gone through that country without being embedded.” “To this, Arraf strongly agrees and argues that embedding is not necessary to knowing the country and the people well. For instance, she states that “there are places you cannot go now without being embedded”; yet, if you “know the country as we do, as I do, you go there, you can actually speak Arabic to the Iraqis,” which, as she explains, is both necessary and sufficient in understanding the story in Iraq. Fumento, on the other hand, suggests that unilateralists are getting too comfortable sitting on the sidelines reporting second-hand information without actually experiencing what the soldiers experience. But perhaps it is actually the embedded journalists who exhibit a “false bravado,” as Arraf claims, because they are attempting to credit themselves with a combat mission (“Special Iraq Panel”).

In his article, “Covering Iraq: The Modern Way of War Correspondence,” Fumento addresses Rieckhoff’s comment: “Rieckhoff, an anti-war vet who was hawking his boring book...labeled those who actually go into battle with troops as ‘jock sniffers.’ To him, the Ernie Pyles and Joe Rosenthals of America’s past were just a bunch of contemptible groupies.” Fumento continues to mock Rieckhoff’s statement by projecting his term “jock sniffers” onto journalist heroes of the past, where, under the photo of the famous flag raising at Iwo Jima, Fumento’s caption reads: “The most iconic image of World War II, by ‘crotch-sniffer’ Joe Rosenthal”. Fumento’s response demonstrates the sharp contrast between the view of a soldier and that of an embed. While in the field they might get along, tension still exists between the two. Rieckhoff seems to be the more rational of the two, arguing not for the factual storytelling of a soldier’s plight, as one might expect from a veteran, but rather for the combination of correspondence gained by embeds, unilateralists and non-American war correspondents. Ultimately, both Dillow’s and Rieckhoff’s accounts of soldiers’ responses to embeds reveal the complexity surrounding an embed’s inability to objectively view both sides, while resisting the distractions of camaraderie, fear of the enemy, and pressure from soldiers to communicate their stories compassionately. Despite the military’s skepticism of embeds and the tension created by mistrust in Vietnam, embedded reporting has changed the way the military views the media. As Commander Rodriguez points out, “The shift in the military’s perspective of the media from that of an adversary to an ally was central to the mission” in Iraq and ultimately to the development of a symbiotic relationship between media and military (Rodriguez).
“A that-could-be-me-feeling.”

The Use of Personal Pronouns in Embedded Reports

Julia Fox and Byungho Park, authors of a statistical analysis of the use of personal pronouns by embedded reporters versus non-embedded reporters, suggest that the context in which embeds use personal pronouns reveals not a lack of objectivity or an imposition of a journalist’s personal values, but rather a use of personal pronouns conducive to and necessary for an eye-witness account of events. Fox and Park agree with my argument in that “news professionals have come to adopt objectivity as an essential component of sound reporting”; yet, “given their physical and likely emotional closeness to their embedded troops,” “embedded journalists’ objectivity [is] jeopardized as they [become] part of the story.” In order to better understand this problem, Fox and Park advocate a rethinking of “the concept of objectivity in terms of broad standard of impartial inquiry, rather than as absolute adherence to traditional conventions and techniques such as the use of impersonal, third-person writing style.” However, we must be critical of this reconceptualization, as one of the benefits of an unattainable goal of objectivity is that it forces journalists not only to be cautious about and aware of subjectivity, but to adhere to traditional conventions characteristic of objective reporting (Fox).

The Fox/Park study makes three critical hypotheses: First that, “Embedded journalists will use the first-person singular pronoun in its various forms— I (nominative), me (objective), and my/mine (possessive)—more often than nonembedded reporters.” Second that, “Embedded journalists will use the inclusive pronoun in its various forms— we (nominative), us (objective), and our/ours (possessive)—more often than nonembedded reporters.” And finally, “Embedded journalists will be referred to by others with the personal pronoun you (nominative and objective) and your/yours (possessive) more often than nonembedded journalists.” Although Fox and Park found statistically significant evidence supporting hypothesis one and part of hypothesis two, they admit that “this study does not take into account to context of the reporters’ use of the first-person singular pronoun.” While the study’s statistics reinforce my argument that embedded journalists incorporate themselves and their lives into their stories, it is rash to assume that mere analysis of word usage accounts for content and subject. Fox and Park set up a statistical analysis of pronoun usage through three hypotheses, the null hypothesis being that the likelihood of personal pronoun usage is equal for both embeds and unilaterals. The study then concludes that there is statistically significant evidence to reject this null hypothesis in favor of hypothesis one: embeds use personal pronouns more often than unilaterals. While this may be the case, the Fox/Park study uses this empirical evidence for an interpretive analysis. They continue to suggest several situations in which the use of the personal pronoun I is “similar to an eyewitness account of events,” as in the case of Art Harris who reported, “Paula, right now I’m standing in a major intersection in southern Iraq.” Here, journalist Harris is not making himself a “central actor in the story” which lead Fox and Park to the conclusion that “the reports [by embeds] were void of personal values and ideologies.” However, Fox and Park have no statistical evidence to support this claim. Their post-hoc analysis is a mere observation of trends in the use of personal pronouns, yet their introduction claims that statistical evidence proves that embedded reporting is void of personal ideology (Rodriguez, 36).
provides an in-depth analysis of the use of personal pronouns, it deceptively masquerades an interpretive qualification as a statistical quantification of embedded journalists’ assertion of personal values.

Despite its persuasive nature, the Fox/Park study remains a microscopic magnification of a complex, macroscopic problem. Penn State sociologist Andrew M. Lindner, for example, studies the number and type of stories published about the war in Iraq, using statistical evidence on a more macroscopic level to demonstrate the result of embedded reporting: more articles are published “about the U.S. soldiers’ personal lives and fewer articles about the impact of the war on Iraqi civilians.” Lindner stratifies articles by five topics: combat, military movement, soldier deaths, soldier source, and soldier human interest. “Embedded reporters published stories with soldier sources in 93.2 percent of the stories analyzed,” compared to independent reporters whose reports had soldier sources in only 42.8% of the stories analyzed. Similarly, embeds reported on soldier human interest in 24% of stories analyzed while independent journalists and Baghdad-stationed reporters reported on soldier human-interest in only 1.4 and zero percent of stories, respectively (“Embedded Reporting Influences”). This evidence suggests that, overall, embeds are more likely to report on soldier human-interest and to use soldier sources than are independent journalists or Baghdad-stationed reporters. “But the question may really be whether embedded reporters had the access or opportunity to talk to people other than the soldiers,” says Lindner whose point here reinforces my argument that the narrowed scope inherent in embedded reporting automatically skews the content of embedded reports, making objectivity and neutrality impossible.

**Distraction, Desensitization, Arrogance**

**The Effect of the Media-Military Conspiracy**

The media-military relationship, built upon embedded reporting, does not simply cause a biased collection of war correspondence. In order to rally pro-war sentiment—to justify America’s desire to spread democracy and glorify the American soldier—the media and military have teamed up for the war in Iraq, creating a Hollywood-esque dramatization of war which is transforming reporting on combat in Iraq from a relay of unbiased facts to a red carpet media event; they are manufacturing entertainment rather than offering information. In doing so, the media-military partnership has effectively distracted and desensitized the American public, strategically utilizing American over-confidence in U.S. war ability in order to justify the use of civilian embeds.

Embedded reporters, whether they intend to or not, are keeping Americans occupied with stories of war correspondents rather than stories of war. By introducing embeds in the war in Iraq, the media-military machine is providing Americans with a convenient distraction—one in which embeds continue to glorify themselves, making Americans think they are winning a war, while the military continues to make poor decisions in Iraq that go completely unnoticed. Embed and foreign correspondent, Robert Kaplan, comments on this in “The Media and the Military,” where he attempts to justify the media-military intimacy created by the “embed phenomenon.” He writes, “The Columbia Journalism Review recently ran an article about the worrisome gap between a wealthy media establishment and ordinary working Americans. One solution is embed-
ding, which offers the media perhaps their last, best chance to reconnect with much of the society they claim to be a part of" (Kaplan). Embeds may be attempting to relate to the working American public, but in reality, their presence on a battlefield makes this "reconnection" impossible. Still, "the hundreds of embedded journalists aren't just reporting on this war; they're serving as surrogates for all civilians. And they've given the story a visceral immediacy, a that-could-be-me feeling" (Fox, 37).

And it is precisely this feeling that keeps the public's attention drawn towards the media, rather than the true heroes, the men and women of the American military who are dying in service of a country, not the embeds who are "dying" to get a story. By creating this distraction, which focuses attention on the death count of reporters rather than on the death count of soldiers and Iraqis, the media-military mechanism is operating a machine that symbiotically serves the interests of each. Should the Pentagon make a mistake with military strategy, it can simply force embeds to comply with the orders of the unit's commander. Similarly, the media gain inside access which, while inherently biased, blindsides the American public with the idea that some inherent truth lies inside troop operations. Both at home and in Iraq, there seems to be an overwhelming notion that the true story is "embedded" in daily troop operations and that if we could only gain access, we would achieve an omniscient understanding of war. In reality, this complete understanding comes not from embeds whose scope is narrowed by limited information, but from a range of sources and stories able to contribute to a more objective truth.

The distraction caused by embedded reporting takes the form of a theatrical dramatization. "At first there is a build up and expectancy of a Hollywood script about to unfold, but then reality hits and we are reminded that war feels like war," says journalist P.J. O'Rourke (War Feels Like War). War may feel like war, but it certainly does not look like it. Though we expect a Hollywood script, instead of witnessing the gut-wrenching thriller scenes of war movies like Black Hawk Down, we find bizarre uncut film of cameramen chasing soldiers through fields. Not only does this raise questions about the relationship between Hollywood and news media, fiction versus reality, but for those who have never experienced war, it begs the question: what does war actually look like? Ironically, the documentary, meant to expose the condition of necessary unilateral reporters, actually gives insight into what war might look like if there were no reporters in the field at all and, instead, a video camera were simply left in the war zone to shoot uncut, unedited reels. Surprisingly, war does not have the rushed thrill of the Hollywood renditions. While at times soldiers are excited by the action and begin throwing around meaningless expletives, the reality of war appears to be a slow, daunting march towards an untimely and inevitable death.

This march, however, does not end in Iraq. With increasing ubiquity, embedded reporting has become a phenomenon that cannot restrict itself to war coverage overseas. In transforming war correspondence into a cinematic narrative, journalists have followed wounded soldiers home, reporting directly from hospital beds. "The idea was simple," writes Anne Hull. "If the Pentagon was embedding journalists with military units in the invasions of Iraq, why couldn't it apply the same principle inside the nation's largest military hospital?" In her article, "Proposing a Variation on Embedded Reporting," Hull recounts her experience as a reporter embedded in the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. Hull writes, "We'd locate ourselves inside a military hospital to explore the physical and psychological aftermath of war." The media-military
Kylie Tuosto

machine thus does not stop in Iraq, but continues to impose itself upon soldiers at home. “We wanted a counterpoint to the ongoing stories and imagery of tanks rolling toward Baghdad and Pentagon officials point at maps. It was time for a gut check. The casualties were starting to come home” (Hull). Hull claims that, once the terror and excitement of war is over for the wounded, they come home to an uncomfortable environment in which they become outcast from mainstream society. However, as War Feels like War clearly demonstrates, the physical hardship of war is surprisingly similar to the hospital experience. This parallel demonstrates two things: first, it emphasizes the fact that war, as demonstrated by uncut film, is not equivalent to the common Hollywood-esque perception and, second, that the term “embed” is becoming a token of Operation Iraqi Freedom, showcasing a heroic embed icon that displays the media-military intention of distracting the American public from combat and military operations in Iraq.

However, the media-military scheme does not stop with the icon of the embed. Rather, it forces a dramatization of the military experience similar to the one provided by war imagery used in film production, which inherently sensationalizes combat in order to sell movie tickets. This raises the question: to what extent does the news media attempt to take its cues from or even compete with Hollywood in order to retain a captive audience? While I cannot answer this question here, we might consider the fact that, to some extent, the news media must obtain a universal audience in order to make money and, in doing so, must compete with other forms of media, both entertainment and infotainment. We can easily see how the news media might fall into a habit of sensationalizing reality for the sake of selling stories. However, embedded reporting is the result of a combined effort, both media and military, to dramatize the war in Iraq.

By allowing the media and military to enter this illicit relationship, America stumbles down a slippery slope. First, we are distracted by embeds, whose stories provide compelling human-interest pieces eliciting reader emotion, despite truth-value. Then, we become distracted by the fact that our favorite television news anchor has flown into Baghdad to begin war correspondence. And before we know it, all we want to know is how many civilian reporters have been killed in Iraq—as if it were some awful statistic not in any way associated with the fact that reporters are risking their lives out of greed, whereas soldiers are risking their lives out of duty and loyalty to their nation.

Desensitization
American Apathy for War

This distraction then becomes part of an overall desensitization to the horrors of warfare, which is apparent in the American public’s indifference towards war. The surrogacy provided by embedded reporters is inherently contradictory in that it claims to offer a reconnection to and a link between war experience and the American audience; yet, in reality, it merely serves as a filter through which Americans might read someone else’s experiences, someone else’s reaction to war. Short of having all civilians take military-assisted tours through Baghdad, it is quite impossible for the public to experience war; perhaps reporters are the closest substitute for personal experience. However, as we have seen in the inherent lack of objectivity, embedded reporters in particular may not be the best substitute, as they become a filter that actually puts one personal human

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experience between reality and the audience. In this sense, Americans are faced with the impossibility of personal experience and the dissatisfaction of being once removed from war itself. It serves only to create more apathy for and desensitization to war: after seeing the most gruesome pictures and reading the most glorified war stories, the American public is simply tired of trying to connect with war when, in actuality, it isn’t even possible.

American apathy for war is not only a problem for pro-war, Operation Iraqi Freedom supporters, but, as Paul Rieckhoff can attest, it is a problem for soldiers coming home from Iraq as well. "There’s a war going on over there," says Al Franken, “and most Americans just don’t relate to it at all.” It is the one thing Franken, Arraf, Fumento and Rieckhoff all agree on. “They [the American people] live life uninterrupted,” says Paul Rieckhoff. “It is patriotism light… and my biggest criticism of this administration is that they haven’t asked the American people to do anything.” To this, Fumento points out that every unit with which he was embedded complained, “why don’t the folks back home know what we’re doing here?” a question to which Fumento responds: “I’m afraid that a good part of the explanation is that reporters aren’t getting out to them” (“Special Iraq Panel”). And this indifference to war becomes frustrating for reporters as well as for soldiers returning home. MSNBC’s embedded foreign correspondent Richard Engel speaks to this undeniable apathy from a journalist’s perspective. In the onset of war, during the “Shock and Awe” Campaign, “everyone wanted to know every sound and picture and image that we could get out of Iraq. Now five years later we have a huge infrastructure in the country, but the interest level has dropped dramatically and that’s one of the frustrating things, when you’re in Baghdad and you want to tell a story and people don’t want to listen.” Even two years ago, claims Engel, Americans were interested in stories of conflict in Iraq. “Now, nobody asks anymore. People don’t want to hear it, even on a personal level” (Richard Engel). Even Engel’s family and friends grow tired of the constant reminder of their own lack of participation in the war effort. American apathy, then, seems to come from the guilt “every man [feels] for not having been a soldier,” as well as from the media’s contribution to the public’s perception of war (“Special Iraq Panel”).

The American public, due either to naïveté or necessity, gets its information from the news media. If the media, as I have argued, cannot report objectively, then we can expect very little from the American public in return. The sheer volume of information overwhelms Americans so that they either disregard the war altogether or naively believe whatever article or photograph happens to slide across their desk on Monday morning. And part of this apathy and lack of concern stems from the comfortable lives most Americans live and the confidence and pride they seem to have in their nation’s supreme military and weapons arsenal. So long as Americans feel that their presence in Iraq is morally justified by the spread of democracy, citizens will not be able to feel any of the effects of war – especially so long as there are no direct repercussions for the individual. American overconfidence leads paradoxically to an apathetic attitude toward war; what should breed patriotism actually generates both arrogance and indifference.
American overconfidence can be characterized not only by an inherent belief in U.S. military superiority. The mere use of embeds exposes the relative ease with which both Americans and the military are willing to allow civilians on the battlefield, despite the obvious danger. Moreover, as becomes apparent in the ground rules of embedded reporting, the military is bending over backwards in order to take care of extra personnel. “Use of priority inter-theater airlift for embedded media to cover stories [...] is highly encouraged [...] units should plan lift and logistical support to assist in moving media products to and from the battlefield so as to tell our story in a timely manner” (“Public Affairs...Sec 2.C.); as if to suggest that if soldiers want their stories told, they should be ready and willing to help the media in any way possible. Both an exaggerated effort by the military to accommodate media embeds and a willingness to risk more American lives supplement embedded journalism’s contribution to a growing problem of American egotism, which ultimately leads to a lack of separation between government and free press. By teaming up and taking sides, the news media are waving the American flag, helping the Pentagon promote support for Operation Iraqi Freedom and, by extension, support for the current administration. In fusing together what should be entirely independent operations, the media-military cohort creates a pro-war dramatization that is based on an entirely un-American relationship.

In the past, media-military cooperation has been much less conspicuous. For the sake of keeping free-enterprise free, the only relationship shown publicly has been one of mistrust and competition between the media and military. With the advent of embedded reporting, however, the public has the unique opportunity to fixate its war-time anxieties on the icon of the embed—a courageous journalist heading off to war. This, however, is not to say that embedded reporting has been unimportant in the past. Michael Fumento, for example, responds to comments by screenwriter-director Nora Ephron: “Amazingly, Ephron also believes embedding was an evil idea dreamed up for this war, even though in World War II and later wars all major news outlets had reporters with the troops on the front lines. That’s how we got the incredible dispatches of Ernie Pyle, and the wonderful Iwo Jima flag-raising photo by Joe Rosenthal” (Fumento) Fumento correctly suggests that both Joe Rosenthal and Ernie Pyle made significant contributions to war journalism in their time. However, as he himself implies, it is the term “embedding” which was dreamed up for this war, not the idea of having journalists on the front lines. And thus we see how embeds are becoming a tool of the media-military machine in serving as surrogates to the American public for an experience they cannot sufficiently or accurately communicate.

The disparity between the actual war experience and what is being relayed to the American public is apparent to both the media and the military. Thus, there is a need to fill the gap with a fabricated story surrounding the reality in Iraq. In doing so, the media and the military have entered into an illicit relationship in which both parties effectively take advantage of one another, resulting in a theatrical production suited for the naive and apathetic American public. What we are beginning to see with embedded reporting is a de-secularization of American enterprise in favor of an increasing fictionalization, militarization and politicization. Where once we were looking to the First Amendment
to separate the powers of media and government, providing checks and balances by establishing a government-free press, we are now allowing the media and military to become accomplices in the creation of a Hollywood-esque dramatization of war in Iraq used to propagate pro-war sentiment at home as well as justify America’s presence in overseas conflict.

“In bed with the military.”
A Sexual Interpretation of the Media-Military Relationship

Perhaps unwittingly, the Pentagon’s choice of the word “embed” implies a sexual pun that helps illuminate the transgressive and incestuous quality of the media-military relationship. “This time the military said, ‘We’re going to embed reporters.’ We’d never heard that word before and we weren’t sure what it meant,” says Marjorie Miller, editor of the L.A. Times; “We didn’t want to be in bed with the military, but we certainly wanted to be there. And we didn’t know if it was a trick or if... they, for some reason that we couldn’t fathom, had decided to give us access.” Embedding reporters suggests an incestuous intimacy between the media and military; which becomes an unprecedented sexual exploitation of the concept of freedom of the press. Not only are both parties disregarding the notion of a free and independent press, but both are exploiting one another’s resources for their own benefit. “A newspaper of our size is a lot like the military. We have to decide how many people to deploy, what equipment we need, how many troops, what our tactics are going to be, get the supplies,” claims Miller, who figuratively blurs the boundaries between media and military operations here (Miller).

Where Miller’s argument blurs the line separating media and military, Fumento’s interest in “false bravado” begins to erase it. Fumento and Arraf argue incessantly over which reporters, embeds or unilateralers, are braver and more courageous. But are “bravery” and “courage” not words associated with soldiers? Should we not be concerned with the bravery of our military personnel rather than that of our journalists? Recently, Robert Kaplan published an article titled “No Greater Honor,” in which he comments on “what it takes to earn the highest award the military can bestow—and why the public fails to appreciate its worth” (Kaplan, 1-2). Meanwhile, embedded war correspondent Richard Engel has been named the 2007 winner of the Medill Medal for Courage in Journalism. “Chosen for his outstanding work in War Zone Diary,” Engel is praised for revealing “the unsanitized and often grim truth” of war in Iraq. Judge of the Medill Medal, Richard Stolley writes of Engel’s accomplishment, “This brilliant, deeply personal story defines both the qualifications for and the need for the Medill Medal” (Hagen). Though his diary is a biased and personal exploration, Engel is given what might be the journalistic/military equivalent of a Medal of Honor. Courage, bravery, and honor, once solely associated with military achievement, are now tokens of a “false bravado” and an attempt to credit embeds with combat missions.

What was first confusion between what it is military and what is media, now becomes an incestuous, exploitative relationship between the two. Paul Workman, a non-American journalist, criticizes embedded reporting as allowing the war to be “covered... by a press corps that’s sleeping with the winner,” (Workman) accusing the media of
sexually exploiting the military. We are reminded, however, that the relationship works both ways. Robert Kaplan writes that when embeds return home from a stint with the military, journalism professors often question whether the “embedded journalists have become, in effect, ‘whores’ of the armed forces” (Workman). Dillow corroborates this claim as he recalls his soldiers’ desire to have their stories told accurately to loved ones back home. “But the biggest problem I faced as an embed with the marine grunts was that I found myself doing what journalists are warned from J-school not to do: I found myself falling in love with my subject. I fell in love with ‘my’ marines” (Dillow). Despite any effort to remain objective, the seductive ways of the military somehow overwhelm reporters, ultimately creating a sexually charged tension between reporters and soldiers, media and military. This tension breeds a unique war dramatization meant not only to entertain, but to distract and desensitize the American public to the harsh realities of war overlooked and convoluted by the media-military machine.

“There’s a fine line between being embedded and being entombed.”

The End of Eye-Witness Journalism

Perhaps, though, neither party is to blame. Perhaps it is not an elaborate scheme or a political conspiracy meant to deceive the American public. Rather, it can be thought of as the result of primitive human instinct. Perhaps the incestuous relationship between media and military is merely a retrospective interpretation mapped onto what is an undeniably complicated situation. When men are capable of instantaneously killing thousands of other men, when the lives of others are being placed in their hands, when all it takes is one bullet, then perhaps it is impossible to remain unbiased, impossible not to take sides, impossible to remain independent of the man on your right. At the same time, we are forced to consider the effect embedded reporting has on the American public’s view of war; as a result, we must be critical of the media and military’s over-willingness to cooperate and corroborate. To the extent that both parties intend to capitalize on a cooperative relationship, we can see that the effect is a paradoxical reconceptualization of the eyewitness war correspondence of previous wars. World War II correspondents Joe Rosenthal and Ernie Pikes created iconic images and glorified stories of soldiers for the American public. Unlike the great journalists of the past, however, embeds themselves are attempting to replace the heroic soldier by becoming the icon idolized by Americans. This evolution of war correspondence has created significant problems for the American perception of the global implications of war in Iraq. Paradoxically, the media and the military are creating both an overwhelming apathy for war and a subconscious desire for soldier human-interest pieces, both of which side-step the important and objective issues of war in favor of total access to information that is ultimately filtered into a self-affirmation of American principle. In a post-September 11th world, the media and military have reached an unprecedented level of cooperation through the use of embedded reporters, calling into question the platonic separation of government and press which lies at the heart of American journalism.
Works Cited
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Works Consulted