Perception and Credibility of Embedded Journalism during the Iraq War

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Abstract

The war in Iraq has provided media sources with new strategies for coverage, yet few studies have examined how embedded journalism can affect the perceptions of television news viewers. In a climate where the news media's credibility is viewed by many as suspect, information regarding the journalistic methods that the public perceives as most credible could prove quite valuable. While other research has evaluated the characteristics of embedded reports in relation to traditional reporting, this study examines whether embedded journalism is perceived by the general public to be more or less credible than traditional, "unilateral" journalism methods.
Perception and Credibility of Embedded Journalism during the Iraq War

When the Department of Defense (DOD) announced a new media management program called embedded journalism, reporters and journalists were allowed intimate access to military units involved in armed conflicts. Embedded journalism, which previously appeared in the 1982 British campaign in the Falkland Islands (Pfau et al. 2004), was first used by the U.S. Government and media organizations in the coverage of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Reporters from various media organizations were sent to accompany troops on the battlefield to provide observations and reports on the war. However, in exchange for this opportunity “journalists had to sign a contract with the military that limited what they were allowed to report on” (Zagreb, 2004). The military’s ground rules imposed restrictions on categories of unpublishable information that would compromise national security and the use of prepublication security review in certain contexts. In a 1945 Supreme Court case, the Associated Press challenged the United States Government to insure “that the widest possible dissemination of information from diverse and antagonistic sources” is available to the public (Associated Press v. United States, p. 20, quoted in Wolfe et al., 2008, p.30). Wolfe (2008) emphasizes that the public has a particular right to free information regarding any war being fought in its name. However, a number of critics have raised concerns about partisan, propagandistic and non-impartial news reporting, dating back even to the first Gulf War (Wolfe et al., 2008). When concerns such as these are raised even prior to an examination of embedded reporting, which studies have shown to be prone to bias by nature, it calls into question the effects this may all have on the general public’s perception of the credibility of the major news sources. This study can help to determine whether there is a
difference in the perception of credibility of embedded versus traditional methods of journalism during the Iraq War.

Literature Review

Extant literature primarily compared and contrasted the results of embedded versus non-embedded (or unilateral) journalism during the invasion and occupation of Iraq during and following Operation Iraqi Freedom. Also discussed were the effectiveness of each type of reporting and the general advantages and disadvantages of each approach.

Problems cited with the embedding of reporters include a lack of context within the greater conflict, leading to a narrow view focused on an individual combat unit and not on the bigger picture of the war (“decontextualized coverage”) (Pfau et al., 2004, p. 76). The Pentagon’s new policy on embedded journalism, initiated in 2003 at the onset of the invasion of Iraq (Hastings, 2005), has served as a stimulus for researchers. News reports will focus more on individual soldiers and their units rather than on any sort of analysis of the whole of the conflict such as Iraqi civilian reaction (Fahmy & Johnson, 2007; Mills, 2003; Pfau et al., 2004; Pfau et al., 2005).

In addition, the issues of bias and journalistic objectivity have been raised by a number of sources. According to Kuypers and Cooper (2005), the general public feels 53% of news stations are biased without regards to journalistic objectivity. Critics feel that reporters embedded in a military unit will, for a variety of reasons, have a tendency to report primarily that which paints their assigned unit and mission in a positive light (Fahmy & Johnson, 2007; Pfau et al., 2004; Pfau et al., 2005). Some have even indicated
that it was the Pentagon’s intent for the embedded reporters to provide an officially sanctioned version of events (Fahmy & Johnson, 2007).

Hastings (2005) pointed out that the government was trying to influence embedded journalists and reverse the trend of negative media coverage infamously ignited by the Vietnam War, the goal being to avoid the revulsion felt by the American public during that conflict by more tightly controlling the scope of reporting during the Iraq War.

Previous studies focused on the impact embedding reporters had on multiple news media. Both print (Pfau et al., 2004) and television (Pfau et al., 2005) news reports were analyzed. News reports from Operation Iraqi Freedom were compared to news stories from Operation Desert Storm (the first Gulf War) and Operation Enduring Freedom (the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2002) (Pfau et al., 2004). In addition, news stories from the invasion portion of Operation Iraqi Freedom were compared to those from the later occupation period of the same conflict (Pfau et al., 2005). Most other research into the effects of embedded reporting is anecdotal, coming from the opinions of scholars, military evaluations and the reporters themselves (Pfau et al., 2004), and indeed one of the studies, by Fahmy & Johnson, made an attempt to codify the opinions of a sample of both embedded and unilateral reporters.

Hypotheses and/or research questions posed by previous studies tended to be somewhat similar to one another. It was anticipated by Pfau and colleagues (2004; 2005) that embedded reporting would produce more favorable stories about military operations than unilateral reporting, which was confirmed in both cases. The 2005 Pfau study went further to find that the stories filed by embedded reporters indicated more trust of military
personnel. It was predicted too that the sense of “organizational commitment,” which can be understood as the degree to which a journalist adopts the mindset of the military and the unit that they are attached to, would be higher among embedded journalists and would actually manifest in a stronger fashion as the length of the embed increased (Pfau et al., 2005). Organizational commitment was found to be higher among embedded journalists but it did not appear to increase as time went on. Finally, both Pfau studies posited that embedded journalists would frame their stories in an episodic (focused on personalizing issues) rather than thematic (presenting “collective or general evidence about issues”) (p. 77) manner, thus furthering the supposed positive bias. This was supported by the results of both studies.

Overall, it thus far appears that embedded journalists do in fact produce news reports that are more favorable than those produced by non-embedded, unilateral reporters as well as reports that are framed in a more episodic, personal format rather than a thematic, detail-oriented one (Pfau et al., 2004; Pfau et al., 2005). Explanations for this can be surmised from the Fahmy & Johnson (2007) study, which determined that embedded journalists had more access to personnel, whereas unilateral journalists had access more along the lines of official press reports, interviews with Iraqi citizens and whatever else they could observe from behind the lines. Fahmy & Johnson also supported the findings from Pfau et al. that embedded reports tended to be more favorable toward the military and government position, whereas unilateral reports tended to be more critical of the government and more sympathetic to Iraqi civilians.

Because some unilateral journalists made use of footage and reports from their embedded colleagues in their own reports, the line between unilateral and embedded
reports may sometimes be difficult to distinguish (Pfau et al., 2005). Because of this, many unilateral reports the potential to take on some of the more biased characteristics of embedded reports. However, the responsibility for providing the most comprehensive view of events really fell to newsroom editors at home (Fahmy & Johnson, 2007).

There are additional factors which may play into public perceptions of credibility as well as overall view of the war. Pfau and colleagues (2008) focused on the effects of television news depicting images of war on viewers. They found that the more viewer involvement by subjects in the war in Iraq, the less they supported the war (Pfau et al., 2008). The study found that negative visual stories created an “emotional impact” which “appears as an increase in arousal, which results in an increase in memory” (Pfau et al., 2008, p. 305). Moreover, they found the visual stories to be particularly damaging, because “once information is encoded and stored, visual information overtakes verbal representations in subsequent retrieval” (Pfau et al., 2008, p. 306). Additionally, it is important to address whether or not the Internet has had an impact on diluting the mass media’s control of information. One study found that even though subjects found alternative sources of information, “the mainstream media are still the ones expected to provoke popular debate and public opinion” (Jha, 2000). Therefore, the relevance of this topic is still very strong.

RQ1: Is there a perceived difference in the credibility of embedded versus traditional journalism methods during the Iraq War?

Method

In order to answer the research question, conducting an experiment with two treatment groups followed by a post-test would be the most accurate tools to evaluate
whether there is a perceived difference in the credibility of embedded journalism versus traditional journalism methods during the Iraq War. Using a similar method as researcher Morman's communication experiment involving a “communication-related variable serving as the independent variable which affected his subject’s attitude, perception, or behavior, know as the dependent variable” (Babbie & Baxter, 2003, p. 205) to test this research question in a similar experiment. For the experiment, one treatment group would receive an embedded news report and a second group would receive a traditional news report. Based on the News Credibility Scale (Appendix A), the results would show that one news report would be perceived as more credible than the other.

**Participants**

To acquire 50 test subjects, volunteers would be solicited by conducting a convenience sample of Carroll University. Students, faculty, and staff would be approached on campus and asked to participate in the experiment. Volunteers complete an informed consent form (Appendix B) as assurances of anonymity. A combination of students, faculty, and staff will be representative of the population. Subject demographics range from middle-aged adults to younger college students, living in or near Waukesha or Milwaukee County. This group of participants would have the “highest viewer rate for broadcast news” (Pew Research Center, 2008).

**Materials & Measures**

The experimental post-test was modeled after the News Credibility Scale (Appendix A) which was created by Gaziano and McGrath and has been tested amongst other notable communication scholars (Rubin, 2004). Gaziano and McGrath utilized the semantic differential scale which is an integral part of being able to quantify and interpret
the results of the survey. Based on this scale, Andsager believes that news media
credibility consists of “fairness, (un)bias, telling the whole story, accuracy, respect for
privacy, watching out after people’s interest, concern for community well-being,
separation of fact and opinion, trustworthiness, concern for public interest, factuality, and
reporter training level” (as quoted in Rubin, 2004, p. 234). The reliability of this scale
was tested by communication scholars Rimmer and Weaver, among others (Rubin, 2004).
Although it was not stated as their intent, Gaziano and McGrath "supported the construct
validity of the Credibility measure by finding that credibility scores were related to the
choice of medium (newspapers or TV) one would believe in light of conflicting stories"

In this experiment, the 50 participants will be divided up when randomly assigned
to one of two treatment groups. To ensure intersubject bias is not a threat to the results of
this experiment, participants will be asked individually to enter a lab room to view a news
clip. The first 25 participants will be shown a seven-minute news clip from Fox News of
an embedded journalist reporting on the Iraqi War. After viewing, subjects will complete
a survey and rate the News Credibility Scale. The participant will then place the
completed survey into a box located in the back corner of the lab room. The same
experiment will be conducted with the remaining 25 participants. Only, this treatment
group will be viewing a seven-minute news clip of a traditional report. The report will be
from the same journalist at Fox News, covering the same event (Iraq War). Doing this,
increases procedure validity and reliability. After watching the clip, subjects will
complete the NCS. During both experiments, the researcher will not be present in the
room to ensure confidentiality of the survey, and to limit interaction with subjects.
Fox News was chosen because they are currently the most watched news network and at the height of the Iraq War, they received 3.3 million viewers a day (BBC News, 2003). We also chose the same network for both news clips in order to counter-act subject bias toward a particular network.

Procedure & Data Analysis

The scoring of the News Credibility Scale is straightforward; once any reverse-coded items are taken into consideration, the individual results will be inserted into a spreadsheet for each group. From the spreadsheets, the mean score of each participant for the entire scale can be calculated. This figure will allow the calculation of a mean rating for each of the groups – Traditional and Embedded. In addition, the mean scores for the responses of all participants for each individual item can be calculated, allowing for a more microscopic view of each specific topic. Range and standard deviation will also be computed for each group in an effort to determine any patterns.

Depending upon the means of each group and the distribution of responses, certain patterns or correlations may become apparent between the scores of each group. The significance of the data will be evaluated using an Independent-sample t-Test. The $t$ value should be great enough to allow a rejection of null hypothesis at the .05 probability level (because addressing a research question rather than a hypothesis, the null hypothesis assumes that there is no difference between the groups). This will determine whether any difference between the two groups is significant beyond what may be attributable to sampling error (Babbie & Baxter, 2003, p. 283-284).
Applying this to the research question, data will show whether there is a.) Any difference in the perception of credibility between embedded and traditional television news reports and b.) Whether those differences are significant in either direction.

Conclusion

Results from the post-test will help shed light on how viewers perceive embedded journalism in regards to its credibility. Data suggests that it could answer the research question and provide reason to believe that there is a difference in the perception of credibility between embedded and traditional journalism. If the results showed that viewers found embedded journalism to be significantly more credible it could serve as a gateway for how news stations report war coverage. However, if traditional journalism is rated more credible this study would be an aid to re-enforce traditionalist journalistic style. Provided that the results determine a higher rating towards either one of the styles, it could serve as an asset to the media industry. Overall, the experiment measures the most credible style of journalism and could lead to higher credibility ratings for respective news stations.

This experiment could possess some threats in its validity and might have limitations in the methodology. In measuring the credibility of journalism, the experiment is limited in that there is only one method for obtaining and measuring the results. Other threats include social threats such as hypothesis guessing, evaluation apprehension, and researcher expectancies. Hypothesis guessing could occur if the subjects in this study attempt to guess what results the researcher is looking for and their actions could reflect their rating. For example, if participants from both treatment groups
were to guess that the researcher is looking for high ratings in news credibility, then both news clips could get equally high ratings. Another threat, such as evaluation apprehension, could affect the results of this experiment. Subjects might become anxious about being in a research study and therefore, the results may not reflect reality. Researcher expectancies could also create a bias in this study. The researcher can bias the results of a study both consciously or unconsciously by communicating what the desired outcome for a study might be.

Other threats include having the results misinterpreted. For instance, embedded journalism as a field could still be maturing as a medium much like the internet in the early 1990’s, and viewers could still be adjusting to the newest phases of it. It would be difficult to trace this in the results. This study only deals with one report inside the Iraq war, so results could be very unfulfilling to apply to embedded journalism as a whole. Moreover, the participants in this study were all faculty, staff, and students at Carroll University. The results may show how credible participants of a single University find news stations rather than the credibility of embedded journalism. This would be a strong external threat to validity, because it would be an unrepresentative sample of the general population. Another threat of validity to the study is the Iraq War itself, since it has a deep history and could be a very polarizing topic. Therefore, the post-test could result in the subject’s evaluation of the Iraq war itself, rather than the credibility of embedded journalism.

This study should only be considered a pre-cursor. There is a lot of research to be done in the field of embedded journalism. For instance, very little has been done with the actual violent images produced during warfare and the different results embedded
journalism yields. Most studies just focus on reports of casualties and resistance. This test could produce valid information on credibility, but may not even shed light on the psychological effects of seeing an embedded report shown. Moreover, there is little information on the embedded journalist themselves. What effect does being embedded present on how they frame the news? Can they give an accurate description of an event if they are reliant on the military for protection? This is vital information that must be tested, especially with any country currently involved in war.
References


http://people-press.org/report/?pageid=1360


Appendix A

News Credibility Scale*

Instructions: We'd like you to rate the TV news report you’ve just watched, based on the following criteria. Please circle the number between each pair of phrases that best represents how you feel about the news report.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Is fair</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td>Is unfair</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Is biased</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td>Is unbiased</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Tells the whole story</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td>Doesn't tell the whole story</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Is accurate</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td>Is inaccurate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Invades people's privacy</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td>Respects people's privacy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Does watch after viewers' interests</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td>Does not watch after viewers' interests</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Is concerned about the community's well-being</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td>Is not concerned about the community's well-being</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Does separate fact and opinion</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td>Does not separate fact and opinion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Can be trusted</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td>Cannot be trusted</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Is concerned about the public interest</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td>Is concerned about making profits</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Is factual</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td>Is opinionated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Has well-trained reporters</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td>Has poorly trained reporters</td>
<td></td>
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Note: For the purpose of this study, the instructions were changed from a newspaper to a TV news report. Also, question number six was changed from “readers’ interests” to "viewers’ interests". Items 2 and 5 are reverse-coded.

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Appendix B

Volunteer Consent Form

April 2, 2009

Perception and Credibility of Embedded Journalism

Purpose
You have been invited to participate in a research study about journalism methods. This study is being conducted by Jessica Uriniuk, Ben Lippert, and Patrick Hennessey, from the Research Methodology communication class at Carroll University. This study is being conducted as part of an experiment.

Procedures
You will be asked to complete a questionnaire after watching a brief video clip. The questionnaire will take about 5 minutes to complete. By completing and placing your completed survey in a box in our lab room, you are voluntarily agreeing to participate. You are free to decline to answer any question.

Risks
There are no known risks if you decide to participate in this research study.

Benefits
There may be no personal benefits for participating in this study. The information collected may not benefit you directly, but the information learned in this study should provide more general benefits to our experiment.

Costs and Compensation
There are no costs or compensation to you for participating in the study.

Confidentiality
This survey is anonymous. Do not write your name on the survey. No one will be able to identify you or your answers, and no one will know whether or not you participated in the study. Should the data be published, no individual information will be disclosed.

__________ Subject’s initials

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You were selected as a participant in this study because of your availability and you have voluntarily expressed an interest in being surveyed.
Questions
If you have any questions about the study, please contact Jessica Urinuk at 262-832-8721 or by email at juriniuk@cc.edu.

Subject’s name (printed) _____________________________
Signature of subject ________________________________
Date __________________________

Investigator Statement
I have discussed the above points with the subject. It is my opinion that the subject understands the risks, benefits, and obligations involved in participation in this experiment.

Signature of Investigator ______________________________
Date __________________________

Note: Carroll University has reviewed our request to conduct this project. If you have any concerns about your rights in this study, please contact Dr. Barbara King at Carroll University by email at bking@cc.edu.