

A Flood of Images into Homes

By David Hiltbrand and Gail Shister

Sometimes it is hard to see the desert for the sand - a lesson borne home by the watershed TV coverage of the war in Iraq.

For the last week, we have had the unprecedented experience of watching a war unfold in real time. But analysts maintain that television's ride-along reporters are too close to the story they are covering. And the unfiltered torrent of images they are sending back - NBC anchor Tom Brokaw has likened it to "drinking from a fire hydrant" - has been overwhelming, leaving viewers confused about the course of the conflict.

Though viewership is up - 300 percent for the cable news channels and 10 percent overall for broadcast since March 19 - some experts feel that viewers would be better served by more concise and analytical reports.

"Up to this point, you could very... effectively digest 24 hours of coverage into an hour of network or cable," says Kathleen Hall Jamieson, dean of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication.

One of the canniest strategic calls made by Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld and the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the months leading up to the war was the decision to allow 800 reporters and camera operators to travel with U.S. troops. That policy has resulted in "images unlike any we have ever seen coming back from a battlefield," says Steve Capus, executive producer of *NBC Nightly News*.

CBS anchor Dan Rather recalls that "in Vietnam, you would see an edited film version of a battle maybe two or three days after it happened. In the [1991] Gulf War, we saw virtually no television footage. As recently as the Afghanistan campaign, television documentation was scant. Here we have a literal flood of live pictures from the battlefield - and not from a distance. Up-close and very personal."

The brave new world of "embedded" journalism has certainly altered the usually adversarial relationship between the news media and the military, a hangover from the Vietnam era.

For four decades, war reporters have chafed at being spoon-fed information at briefings. This time, the Pentagon did not merely throw them a bone - it offered them the whole carcass. The cable and broadcast networks have been hard-pressed to digest it all.

"I stand in our control room many hours in the day, and I'm just amazed at the images we're getting back," says Mark Effron, vice president of live-news programming for MSNBC. "We're looking at [correspondent] David Bloom riding live through the desert, Kerry Sanders being pinned down by gunfire. It's extraordinary. This war is changing how the world gets its news."

The remarkable wedding of unlimited access and satellite technology is also presenting new challenges for the networks.

"The 'embed imagery' is coming back so fast, it outpaces our ability to contextualize it," says Paul Slavin, executive producer of ABC's *World News Tonight*. "It's a fascinating problem - for the Pentagon as well. Sometimes it is coming back before the commander on the field knows what [his troops] are reporting."

Smitten with their newfound capability, the networks have tended to load up on field reports. In one example, on Monday night several channels showed startling, green-tinted night-

vision scenes of a surprise attack, complete with clearly visible tracer rounds, on Marines who thought they had secured a building in southern Iraq.

While dramatic, that material does little to add to viewers' overall understanding of the war.

"With so many reporters calling in live, there's no time to reflect," says Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, a research institute. "Speed is always the enemy of accuracy and nuance."

The TV news outlets have struggled to correct the myopic view provided by their field correspondents. "The real-time imagery coming in from the front lines is very powerful, but it is a tiny slice of a gigantic operation," ABC's Slavin says. "It can leave you with the impression that you're getting the whole picture. But it is important to take all that information and synthesize it, to come up with a more general view."

Up to this point, the networks have been exceedingly pleased with the coverage they have offered. "By comparison with the Gulf War, I think this is a roaring success," says Tom Bettag, executive producer of ABC's *Nightline*.

Some observers, however, detect a pervasive and alarming note of jingoism. "The television coverage and some of the newspaper coverage is unabashedly biased," says Michael Bush, journalism professor at Long Island University. "Many of the TV reporters have abandoned objectivity and are simply cheerleading. Not only [boosting] our side but criticizing Iraq for doing what almost any country would do in a war."

Most experts say that embedding warps objectivity.

"If a reporter is with a soldier, sleeps in the same tent, eats the same food, faces roughly the same danger - if the reporter is a human being, it's very difficult to... write critical copy about the guy he just had dinner with," says Marvin Kalb, a senior fellow at Harvard University's Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy.

"Rumsfeld rolled the dice and went for embedding on the assumption it would create more sympathetic coverage for the war, and it has."

The networks strenuously deny that their correspondents have been compromised.

"They're reporters. They're not there to be propaganda machines," NBC's Capus says. "They are there to report what they see. Some days, that is favorable. Other days, it may not reflect well on the American effort."

What is emerging on TV is the most vivid portrait of the infantryman's plight since cartoonist Bill Mauldin was depicting weary World War II soldiers.

"The strength of the coverage is understanding what it's like to be out in that sandstorm and sitting for all those hours in an endless convoy," ABC's Bettag says.

The war also may be generating a far more unexpected side effect: sympathy for the media.

"This is giving viewers a far greater appreciation of the risks reporters take," Penn's Jamieson says.

While the all-news cable channels can focus on Iraq, the traditional networks have tried to juggle war coverage with entertainment and sports programs.

"They haven't figured out a comfortable mix," says Paul Levinson, chair of Fordham University's communications and media-studies department. "Seeing Peter Jennings say: 'Here's the war. Now back to the Oscars' - that did not work well."

Similarly, during the weekend on CBS, Dan Rather was clearly disgruntled at playing sixth man to early rounds of the network's NCAA men's basketball tournament. "By any reasonable analysis," Rather says, trying to temper his words, "whenever possible, priority should be given to those 19- and 20-year-old men and women who are fighting and dying 8,000 miles from home over those who are engaged in another blowout basketball game."

Though it may not always be apparent, the TV outlets are trying to exercise restraint, out of tactical and personal considerations. From their frontline positions, reporters, monitored by the Pentagon, have been careful not to reveal sensitive information.

Before the invasion began, an industry-wide pact was reached to not show the faces of casualties for 72 hours or until the families were notified, whichever came first. The networks are extending the same sensitivity to prisoners of war. Out of concern for families, the networks will continue to avoid the most graphic footage, even if, as expected, the battle for Baghdad turns nasty.

"We're having to make difficult decisions 24 hours a day," MSNBC's Efron says. "But we don't want to show people shot on live TV and we're not going to. We're sensitive to the idea that that is somebody's son or wife or husband. We can convey what is going on without showing that."

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