

How TV performed bringing the war home

The rescue of Pfc. Jessica Lynch was a perfect story for TV: Dramatic and entertaining, with no real effect on the conduct of the war.

By Jonathan Storm

Television's most heavily reported story of the Iraq war focused on a single person, Jessica Lynch. Although her rescue illuminated the daring and ingenuity of the U.S. military, it did not affect the conduct or outcome of the war.

But it was the perfect story for what should be called The TV War, a production that demonstrated without question that when the nation's two biggest exports, aerospace equipment and show business, come together, useful and informative news gets left behind.

Though removed by 10,000 miles in location and 100 years in the technology of its telling, the saga of the plucky 19-year-old private was a rehash of that cliché of silent movies, easily understood and embraced by all, when the virtuous heroine tied to the railroad tracks was swept away from the onrushing locomotive by the brave hero.

"Jessica's Rescue" demonstrated the principle that the Pentagon expected would apply when it allowed reporters to tag along with the troops: The thirst for visceral storytelling would overwhelm the higher journalistic goal of in-depth, and possibly unflattering, coverage. And, as in most aspects of the war, the Pentagon was right.

Television could not resist using breathless, scattershot dispatches from "embedded" reporters to produce The TV War. It was a show that sanitized the horror and death of combat, invited savvy veterans to provide commentary, and produced an entertaining combination of sports-style action and drama, suitable, if not for the whole family, at least for the group that's old enough to be allowed to watch Dawson's Creek.

All is quiet on the tube now, as President Bush prepares to stand on an aircraft carrier tonight - no chance for TV imagery is wasted on this administration - and tell the nation that the major combat is over.

But for a few weeks, cable news channels snatched impressive (for them) ratings by keeping viewers hooked with coverage of big plays, and constant analysis and predictions from ex-military officers. Their styles were as divergent as those of unpretentious football commentator John Madden and urbane play-by-play man Al Michaels - but, despite their best efforts, less entertaining and, usually, less informative.

You had some retired generals, such as NBC's Barry McCaffrey, who espoused the old-fashioned ground game and criticized coach Donald Rumsfeld for relying on the air attack, and others, such as Fox's Tom McInerney, who were gung-ho for the latest offense.

Though McInerney and his fellow missile boosters may be invited back to analyze the next war, it's not surprising that even they were unimpressive in responding to the constant, and unanswerable, question: What will happen next?

There was no clock to run out at the end of the game. Instead, there was the toppling of the Saddam Hussein statue, an image so strong and final that viewers had already turned off The TV War and stopped worrying about whatever messiness was left in Iraq, before another news drama - call it Betrayal in Paradise: The Murder of Laci Peterson - heated up in its place.

TV wasn't manipulated against its will. TV news has been about ratings for 25 years, and The TV War was probably as popular as any sort of combat coverage could be. Unfortunately,

the citizenry wasn't manipulated against its will, either. Drama has been beating dry but significant information on the news for years. Just ask Johnnie Cochran.

Even at its most dramatic, even in times of war, the news is not a consistent ratings grabber. One of the most significant TV aspects of the Iraq war was how few people paid attention.

The numbers were decent, if not spectacular, when missiles flew unexpectedly the first night, March 19. Nielsen Media Research reported that 70.1 million people watched one of the big-four broadcast networks (including Fox) or the four English-language cable news outlets. Every single Super Bowl since 1981 has had more viewers.

By night two, prime-time news viewership averaged 41.7 million, a good-size audience for an Oscars telecast. It went quickly downhill from there.

The cable news stations - Fox News, CNN, MSNBC and CNBC - saw their prime-time audience almost triple in the first week of the war, all the way up to 12.6 million viewers combined. About the same number of people watch a typical episode of Survivor. By last week, the audience dropped to 4.1 million, smaller than before the war.

All the TV news outlets did take time to step away, to provide perspective, and attempt to offer some idea of the long-term consequences of the war. But their bread and butter, especially on cable, was the rat-a-tat battle reports pumped out by reporters using lightweight technology that gave viewers the impression they were in the war, too.

It was a false impression. Thousands of Iraqis were killed or maimed. There were hundreds of American, British and Australian casualties. Images of them, and their suffering, were few.

"Jessica's Rescue" illustrates the point. Reports mentioned briefly, or not at all, the 11 bodies found near the Nasiriyah hospital where Lynch was held. They certainly did not show pictures of the dead. Psychologists who argue that entertainment violence is a bad influence on society are especially critical of violence that's portrayed as having no consequences.

Will sanitized, live-action TV coverage of this war and future ones increase the danger that Americans will become numb to the horror of battle, as Harvard psychiatrist Robert J. Lifton suggests?

Will the success of Fox's root-for-the-home-team approach - frowned upon by network sports announcers but joyfully embraced by many local ones - lead to, as Lifton worries, a "callous, aggressive" America characterized not by compassion, but "triumphalism"?

As one of ABC's hired ex-generals, Richard Hawley, said in a commendable moment of honesty that probably got him yelled at: "I don't know any more than anybody else who's been watching this coverage."

But I do have a few ideas about the future of TV war reporting.

The embedding process worked too well for both the news organizations and the Pentagon not to become a model for the future. Given the expense, however, and the fact that Bill O'Reilly's Fox rant-a-thon quickly resumed its place as cable's No. 1 "news" show during the war, it's likely that there will be fewer reporters in the field.

Technology will make instant reporting ever easier. The need for such complicated, techno-top-of-the-line transmitting units as the "Bloombmobile" - designed in part by NBC's David Bloom, who, so sadly, died during the war - will be obviated as equipment becomes smaller and lighter.

Old generals won't just fade away. There's air time to fill, and TV needs to create the impression that it knows what's going on, even if it doesn't.

And TV news will continue to value drama and entertainment in its war coverage because that's what viewers value, and more viewers means more money, and money drives the television juggernaut.

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