

## War, if it comes, may seem like another 'reality' series

By Brian Lowry

The banners scream across cable news channels, network news magazines, and even newspapers, sounding a lot like a western-film shootout: "Showdown With Saddam." "Face-off in the Gulf." "Countdown: Iraq."

If the United States is going to war in Iraq, the public will see and experience that event mainly through the prism of television. And given the way TV molds material to suit its conventions, it's worth knowing the rules of engagement for how a potential war will be filtered and processed.

Television has always been a visceral medium that specializes in "stories" told up-close and personal. That's why more-complex issues struggle to find air time, while newsmagazines are transformed into single-topic mysteries with dramatic narratives, from *48 Hours Investigates* to *Dateline NBC's* Court TV exclusives.

The same impulse is behind ABC's *Profiles From the Front Line*, a flag-waving documentary series that premiered last week, slickly produced within the network's entertainment division.

And news is usually no longer news in the old-fashioned sense. It has become "real-life drama," in much the same way we accept varieties of so-called reality shows as sitcoms (think *The Osbournes*) or soap operas.

For all the talk about new formats, viewers and TV executives have been programmed to file most things that spill out of the box into those familiar categories. So no matter how contrived the situations may be in a *Joe Millionaire* or *Survivor*, the audience can suspend disbelief and view the contestants as "characters."

The contestants have figured this out. Trista Rehn, the "star" of ABC's *The Bachelorette*, has said that the producers' priority was to make a satisfying TV show, not meticulously document what happened - a trade-off she clearly accepted in exchange for her several hours of fame.

As these programs proliferate, the public finds it harder to discern where entertainment ends and news begins, and many TV news operations - by wrapping promotion for series such as *Survivor* into their newscasts - haven't worked hard at maintaining a distinction.

In addition, news is frequently described in entertainment terms, as if it must be tied to the appropriate movie analogy so people can digest it. In a recent USA Today article about the run-up to war, for example, MSNBC president Erik Sorenson said that, thanks to greater media access and improved technology, "This may be one time where the sequel is more compelling than the original."

Without making too much of such word choices, they betray a mind-set that helps explain both the media's coverage and the way viewers process it. If everything on TV approximates drama, it's no wonder freeway chases trump boring old newscasts.

Similarly, ABC is promoting *Profiles From the Front Line* (8 p.m. Thursdays) as being from Jerry Bruckheimer, "the producer of *Black Hawk Down*," an action-packed war film. It's an implied comparison that has little to do with the series, which spent time tagging along with small Special Forces units operating in Afghanistan - yielding footage generally lacking the pyrotechnics necessary to fulfill our movie-infused expectations.

"We operated in the field as nothing but a documentary unit," said Richard Mackenzie, a

veteran documentarian (his credits include *Afghanistan Revealed*) who has spent 17 years working in the region. "We didn't make agreements. We didn't make promises."

Remove the stirring musical score, and it's not easy to distinguish *Profiles* from news coverage. For Mackenzie, who has worked for various news outlets, "That blurring of the lines is real interesting."

If there's fighting in Iraq, then, after the initial crush of live coverage we won't be watching war per se but the ready-for-prime-time stories culled from it. And with three all-news channels now jockeying for attention, the competition - and pressure to tell the best stories - will be even more intense.

Yet as those stories unfold, they won't exactly be unvarnished "reality," but something swallowed by TV, chewed up, and regurgitated as entertainment.

A cynical form of this view was articulated recently on NBC, in the TV movie *War Stories*, conceived as a weekly series about foreign correspondents. In it, a jaded reporter says, "There's no such thing as truth. That's why we call them stories."

Perhaps not surprising, the movie landed with a dull thud in the ratings opposite *American Idol*, *The Bachelorette* and *Star Search*. In an entertainment culture, even fiction can sometimes feel a bit too real.

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