Spectacular Success or Incomplete Picture?
By Jim Rutenberg and Bill Carter

It was the most heavily televised war in history. But how will history remember television's role in this war?

More than a week after millions of viewers watched the fall of Baghdad, opinions remain divided on how television — the center ring of the war coverage — performed during the war.

Some news executives and critics said television achieved a spectacular success in Iraq, taking the war immediately into American living rooms. But others questioned how clear and complete the coverage really was, suggesting that the public never received a totally comprehensible portrait of what was taking place, and still does not have a full grasp of several significant threads. Among them are the number of civilian casualties; how fierce the fighting really became, and exactly how badly Baghdad was damaged.

Some say the coverage was limited by the scope of war and the very nature of the medium itself, and the mismatch between images and words. Vivid pictures from one fixed position in a battle of no great consequence could overwhelm any context given by an anchor or correspondent.

"I think war turned out to be too big a canvas to capture on the small screen of television," said William Powers, the media columnist for *The National Journal*. At the same time, Mr. Powers said, "There was so much television you began to feel lost in it."

Information outpaced context, everyone agreed. The television war began with orange bombs bursting against the black Baghdad sky, tanks rolling through desert unopposed.

But in five days, the forward momentum had slowed, and suddenly there was tough fighting by Saddam Hussein loyalists.

Some administration officials complained that the pictures from the battles were overwhelming official statements that this was the fastest military advance in the history of warfare. Negativity, they said, was overplayed to the detriment of big-picture accounts of progress.

Pentagon officials and network executives agree that information moved at faster speeds than any had anticipated, and that led to confusion.

"We had guys on video phones going, ‘X has happened,’ " said Paul Slavin, executive producer of "World News Tonight" on ABC. "We'd immediately go to Central Command and they'd say, ‘We don't know anything about that.’ "

American television often has images of downed United States aircraft before Central Command could confirm any was missing, let alone whether it fell to Iraqi fire or mechanical malfunction.

In that sense broadcast news, with many hours between programs, had an advantage over cable news, with 24 hours to fill. It could wait for some of the fog to lift to put events into context.

The most severe clash between on-the-ground reports and official accounts in Washington came with comments from some commanders that Iraqi resistance had caught them off guard during Week 2.

In retrospect, those pronouncements may now seem to have been off base. But producers and editors interviewed this week took issue with complaints by Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld about pessimistic assessments.

"It's more than justified for us to ask questions," said Steve Capus, executive producer of "Nightly News" on NBC. "And then you have the Pentagon flaying the media, saying it's unpatriotic to ask questions. I consider myself a patriot. But when there are questions to be asked, I'm going to ask them."

But for all the criticism that television overplayed the battlefield difficulties there are also critics who say it underplayed the horrors of war, and at times overplayed progress. For example, some television news organizations were often quick to report on discoveries of possible chemical weapons caches that later proved to be false.

Bryan G. Whitman, a Pentagon spokesman, said that while the toppling of the first statue of Mr. Hussein in Baghdad was symbolically important, television gave it more coverage than perhaps it initially deserved.

"At that point," Mr. Whitman said, "it was not representative of Baghdad, and certainly not of all in Iraq. We were having to really remind people that Baghdad was still an unsafe environment and there was still much fighting going on."

American television, meanwhile, spent only a fraction of the time that Arab television did on reports about civilian casualties. Arab televisions were filled with images of suffering innocents; American televisions were not. Thousands of Iraqi soldiers were presumed killed, but very few of them were shown on cable or broadcast news.

"They showed guys loading shells into artillery batteries; armored convoys over and over again; bored soldiers digging in with very little actual combat or shooting or violence," said John R. MacArthur, publisher of *Harper's* and author of *Second Front*, about media coverage in the first gulf war. "What you're looking for in war reporting is an accurate depiction of what happens in war, which is very violent — there are lots of wounded people, lots of dead people."

Some television executives acknowledged that they did not give a full account of the fighting and the fallout for civilians.

They said they were not in a position to do so. For most of the war only two networks had correspondents in Baghdad, ABC and NBC, and their people were restricted by the Iraqis. Several network executives said, however, that their Arab colleagues overplayed civilian casualties.

As for the Pentagon program that placed journalists with the fighting units, they said, the American networks had only a few cameras in a battlefield that spanned hundreds of miles, and could not possibly cover its totality.

Often correspondents and their camera crews traveled toward the rear of a tank column, away from the leading edge of the fight. When they were in the middle of firefights they often kept their heads, and their equipment, down.

"Who knows how much the embedded reporters saw," said Erik Sorenson, president of MSNBC. "Did we see 8 percent of what happened? Did we see 4 percent of what happened? It's arguable they didn't see a double-digit percentage of what happened."

Mr. Sorenson and others said if they could do it over, they would likely assign more free-roving reporters to the battlefield to give better details of the damage that a convoy left behind.

"We were with the soldiers — we were with the attacker as opposed to the attackees," said Marcy McGinnis, a senior vice president at CBS News.

Still, she said, "for the first time ever we actually had video from the battlefield and that is such a huge improvement from being restricted from showing anything, as we were in these previous wars."

To be sure, some fighting did take place in clear detail on television, some of it late at night when a relative few were watching.

Two days before Baghdad fell, after 1 a.m. New York time, the Iraqi information minister, Muhammad Said al-Sahhaf, insisted that there were no United States troops in central Baghdad. But a few minutes later, just blocks away from the minister, Greg Kelly, a Fox News correspondent, appeared live at the city's parade grounds, accompanying United States tanks. "He's just across the street from us," one soldier told Mr. Kelly on camera. "We'll go over and talk to him."

Moments like that, Mr. Whitman said, made the Pentagon news media strategy worthwhile to the officials who devised it. Television, he said, did what it could.

"What TV saw was very real," he said. "As many cameras as were out there on the battlefield, it still demonstrates how hard it is to get a complete picture when you're only looking through a lens."

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