

Story: Pros and Cons of Embedded Journalism, 03/27/03

A partnership between the military and the media has changed the nature of war journalism.

Journalists are experiencing unprecedented access to the battlefield thanks to a partnership between the military and the media that has embedded journalists within specific military units. The embedded reporters have to follow several agreed upon rules as they live with the soldiers and report on their actions.

New rules in a new arrangement

The new arrangement was formed out of meetings between the heads of news organizations and the Defense Department officials aimed at allowing journalists to report on war with the least possible danger.

Before joining their **battalions**, the embedded journalists had to sign a contract restricting when and what they can report. The details of military actions can only be described in general terms and journalists agreed not to write at all about possible future missions or about classified weapons and information they might find.

In addition, the commander of an embedded journalist's unit can declare a 'blackout,' meaning the reporter is prohibited from filing stories via satellite connection. The blackouts are called for security reasons, as a satellite communication could tip off a unit's location to enemy forces, the Pentagon explains.

Seeing "a slice of the war"

At the beginning of the experiment, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld called the embedding of journalists "historic," but cautioned that the close-up view is not always complete.

"What we are seeing is not the war in Iraq; what we're seeing are slices of the war in Iraq," he said.

"We're seeing that particularized perspective that that reporter or that commentator or that television camera happens to be able to see at that moment, and it is not what's taking place. What you see is taking place, to be sure, but it is one slice, and it is the totality of that that is what this war is about."

Thus far, editors of many large papers are pleased with the quality of journalism coming from embedded journalists, according to Editor and Publisher magazine. Susan Stevenson of *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* said the embedded reporters give a "sense of immediacy and humanity" that make the stories very real. "From what a

blinding sandstorm feels like to reporting how one of our embeds broke his unit's coffee pot, we're giving readers a better sense of the field."

How embedding can distort

However there have been instances when the embedded reporters transmitted inaccurate information. On Wednesday, embedded correspondents for several news organizations reported seeing a convoy of up to 120 Iraqi tanks leaving the southern city of Basra, and most news outlets reported a large troop movement.

The next day, a spokesman for the British military said the "massive movement" was really just 14 tanks.

Additionally, some journalism professors have warned that the embedding process can distort war coverage. Syracuse University Professor Robert Thompson warns, "When you are part of the troops that you're going in with, these are your fellow human beings. You are being potentially shot at together, and I think there is a sense that you become part of that group in a way that a journalist doesn't necessarily want to be."

Final results unknown

The results of the embedding experiment will not be known for some time. Bob Steele, from the Poynter Institute, an organization for journalists, says the access "has allowed reporters and photographers to get closer to understanding (the complexities of war), to tell the stories of fear and competence, to tell the stories of skill and confusion. I think that's healthy."

But, Steele cautioned that while "closeness can breed understanding," journalists must remain objective and not write about "we" or "our," but about "they."

"There's nothing wrong with having respect in our hearts for the men and women who are fighting this war, or respect for the men and women who are marching in the anti-war protests. The key is to make sure those beliefs don't color reporting," Steele said.

Vocabulary

battalion (n.) 1 : a considerable body of troops organized to act together : ARMY 2 : a military unit composed of a headquarters and two or more companies, batteries , or similar units (Merriam-Webster)