

WAR, LIVE

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Terence Smith explores how the high-tech media equipment and the "embedding" of some 500 journalists with U.S. military units in Iraq has changed the way wars are covered.

TERENCE SMITH: If Vietnam was the living room war on American television, and the 1991 Desert Storm was the first satellite-fed real time war, this is the high-tech 21st century version.

CORRESPONDENT PETER ARNETT, in Baghdad: This is shock and awe, Tom, for the population of Baghdad.

High-tech coverage

TERENCE SMITH: Familiar voices have been heard in the first few days such as that of veteran war correspondent Peter Arnett reporting for National Geographic Explorer and NBC.

His descriptions made this Operation Iraqi Freedom sound like what it is, a rerun of the first Gulf War, which he reported live from Baghdad for CNN. But this war is different.

While the military is using state-of-the art weaponry, like pilotless Predator drones, the media are employing some cutting-edge technology of their own.

On some networks, virtual view technology makes the battlefield look like a deadly version of a video game, and point of view or "tank cam" video gives viewers a sense of being aboard those armored units that rumble northward into Iraq.

Videophones made popular during the war in Afghanistan bring jerky but real-time images home.

Technology makes the coverage more current, but when the sirens warn of a possible missile-born gas attack, the reporting gets muffled.

CBS ANCHOR DAN RATHER: Hold that microphone up. That's it.

CBS CORRESPONDENT: All right.

"Embedding" reporters with the military

TERENCE SMITH: But technology is no protection against the very real dangers of war.

An Australian journalist was killed today by a car bomb. And correspondent Terry Lloyd and a two-member crew from Independent Television News are missing after coming under fire near the southern Iraqi city of Basra. No American journalists have been wounded so far, but there have been some close calls on air.

CNN's Walter Rodgers was traveling with U.S. troops in northern Kuwait when shells from incoming enemy fire whistled overhead.

WALTER RODGERS: We just heard an incoming. What the hell!

TERENCE SMITH: The big difference in the coverage of this war is the arrangement under which some 500 reporters are embedded or assigned to travel with specific combat units.

TED KOPPEL: Any potential opposition as they can....

TERENCE SMITH: ABC Nightline anchor Ted Koppel has been embedded with the U.S. Army Third Infantry Division. Some of the reporters embedded with troops have not been able to report for days because of the military's concerns about compromising operational security.

CORRESPONDENT: We can't get too specific on locations.

DEFENSE SECRETARY DONALD RUMSFELD: I think we're probably watching something that is somewhat historic.

TERENCE SMITH: Defense Sec. Donald Rumsfeld acknowledged the importance of the embedding process, but cautioned that the close-up view is not always complete.

DONALD RUMSFELD: And what we are seeing is not the war in Iraq; what we're seeing are slices of the war in Iraq.

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.

Some pitfalls of embedded and high-tech coverage

TERENCE SMITH: Syracuse University Professor Robert Thompson sees some potential pitfalls in the embedding process.

ROBERT THOMPSON: The danger to the embedding process is that 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.

TERENCE SMITH: Prof. Thompson argues that there are advantages and disadvantages to high-tech coverage.

ROBERT THOMPSON: The tyranny of the visual, those nights where all that bombing was going on, was so spectacular, was so interesting to see that it essentially blows everything else out of your brain.

Whatever analysis, whatever background, whatever context in history might be being reported tends to be overwhelmed by the fact that you so focus on these images, the likes of which we've never seen before.

TERENCE SMITH: As long as the media connection remains intact and the lights stay on in Baghdad, officials from both sides can engage in verbal combat. The Iraqi information minister made his case directly to the American viewing audience.

IRAQI INFORMATION MINISTER MOHAMMED SAEED AL-SHAHHAF: We have destroyed two of their helicopters. We have announced that yesterday. They said no. One of them has crashed. And the American warplanes have destroyed it in order not to be in the hands of the Iraqis. Well, this is silly. This is silly.

TERENCE SMITH: American and Arab networks have been sharing resources as well. When the shock and awe bombing began Friday, U.S. networks broadcast a live feed from Abu Dhabi Television or al-Jazeera Television, the pan-Arab satellite channel.

But as the war continues, strains are developing that may ultimately reduce coverage.

CNN PRODUCER INGRID FORMANEK: It just got very much more difficult to work in the days during the bombing. We were not allowed to use our satellite phones.

TERENCE SMITH: After months of reporting from Baghdad CNN's correspondent Nick Robertson and his crew were expelled this weekend by Iraqi authorities.

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