

The Role of the Mass Media in Modern Wars

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Introduction

Modern wars need the mass media; the mass media need wars. These statements have to be explained: immediately after the ending of the Gulf war an Israeli general described television as one of the most important means of military strategy. Most governments would have difficulty engaging in a war without the support of the population. This support depends on the belief in the necessity of military action and its emotional rewards. As the majority of the younger generation have had no personal experience of war, their knowledge stems primarily from mass communication: modern media play a substantial role in the construction of reality as well as in attitude formation in the audience. This is especially true of nations with a high level of electronic communication systems, such as the USA. It has now been demonstrated and is common knowledge that the outcomes of American presidential elections are determined not only by political programs but at least to the same extent by a candidate's performance on the screen, i.e. his or her audio-visual image.

This concept of 'image' and its importance for public opinion can also be applied to wars. While propaganda has always played a crucial role in military activities, it has reached new professional levels with the occurrence of global television and the development of increasingly differentiated public relations' strategies.

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While the American public already had a generally pro-action attitude before the Gulf war actually began, the Kuwaiti exile government wanted to reinforce this trend and extinguish the last doubts. In this situation the world's biggest PR firm was hired to develop a systematic communication strategy. In the first stage, it tested what kinds of images and symbols would be most likely to elicit emotional, pro-war reactions from the audience. Not surprisingly, babies and young girls turned out to be especially 'emotional' topics. As a consequence, a video tape was quickly produced and distributed wherein a young girl reported in tears how she had witnessed Iraqi soldiers occupying a Kuwaiti hospital and removing premature babies from incubators they intended to take back to Baghdad.

Strategic Tool

The video was shown on all the major news programs and led to further public and political support for the Bush administration's plan to start the war. After the conflict ended, it turned out that the young 'witness' had been the Kuwaiti ambassador's daughter who had not been outside Washington for several years. At the same time, a medical commission visiting Kuwait was surprised to find that the hospitals did not have any shortage of incubators. So, despite other cruelties by the Iraqi army, this particular story had obviously been made up.

While this event may not be an adequate criterion for evaluating whether the war was 'justifiable' in any respect, it demonstrates the importance of communication strategies in modern wars. This role of communication as a strategic tool meets a media demand for any spectacular event – with the occurrence of mobile broadcasting, live television has become a 'must' in the modern media world. In this context, the Gulf war was probably the first war in history to be announced in television guides. It had its own logo and its own jingles, and the audience could find its beginning announced in the program press. The war actually started during (US) prime viewing time.

During the war itself, reporting was heavily censored and the military actions were presented as video games without any further casualties. Showing victims might have created stronger opposition to the military intervention. American news reporters partly abandoned their original role as

'neutral' observers and used subjective language like 'we' attacked 'them'; thereby reproducing the enemy image-terminology applied by military PR agencies.

The reports concentrated on the actual attacks and gave very little background information on the historical development of the conflict. Thus, most Americans who were asked in a survey knew many details about 'Patriot' missile technology but were hardly informed at all about the geographical and cultural situation of Kuwait and Iraq. It was a war of 'good' against 'evil'.

Somalia

With a different kind of dramaturgy, the arrival of American soldiers in Somalia also was a major example of 'modern' news reporting. Again, the timing of the arrival was centered around the programming of the American broadcasting media. When the army arrived on Somalia's beaches in full battledress, it was facing not the 'enemy' but hundreds of journalists, cameras, professional lighting, a scene not unlike the staging of a Hollywood movie. Faced with this situation the soldiers obviously felt some pressure to behave in a 'camera-fit' manner. To act as heroes they sought out potential 'enemies', bound them up and, with advice from reporters on the right gestures and positions, posed in front of the camera. It seemed as if they were trying to emulate the performances of actors in a film. Nevertheless, the intervention, which was started to reduce famine, was welcomed by the American public.

But Aidid (the Somalia 'Liberation Army' leader) also knew how to handle the media. When the dead naked body of an American soldier was cruelly beaten and taken through the streets, the scene was recorded on video and distributed to the international media. With the need for spectacular audio-visual events, many newsagencies promoted Aidid's wish for global attention. The shocking images destroyed any illusions people may have harbored about the death of a 'glorious' hero. As a consequence the American public changed its opinion and became far more critical of the US engagement in Somalia. Thus, even a single image can have the power to influence attitudes towards military activities.

The Classical Concept of the 'Enemy Image'

Communication has always played a major part in army strategy. During the First World War French and German soldiers voluntarily marched to their certain death and were applauded by enthusiastic national press propaganda. During the German Nazi period propaganda strategies were increasingly professionalized and findings of academic psychology were applied.

In that context, one major element has always been the use of enemy images. While one's own side is described in terms of moral motives and heroic behavior, evil and cowardice are attributed to the enemy. By enlarging the differences between 'friends', and 'enemy', any inhibition about attacking the other side is decreased.

In more general terms, creating an 'enemy image' can be described as follows: the description distinguishes between intention, message, target, means, process, effect: to reach acceptance of or trigger an attack against another (intention), a stereotyped, simplified and negative image (message) of the characteristics, motives, intentions and behavior of the other person or group (target) is created in which emotional or pseudo-informational mass media elements (means) apply selection, exaggeration and fake (process), with the consequence that the social distance between the two sides is increased (effect).

One may also wish to include 'sender' and 'receiver' variables and their interaction in this description, like military leaders or propaganda experts on the one side and a population/global audience or average soldier on the other. The enemy image as described above is exclusive to humans. Non-human primates may also discriminate within and between groups and may even manipulate others in order to create negative attitudes towards a specific target. But it seems that only humans are able to create enemy images through symbolic representations without any face-to-face contact, thus permitting mass propaganda directed at distant goals. Of course, these processes are enhanced by the application of fundamental psychological patterns like fear of strangers or in-group/out-group behavior.

All in all, the creation of an enemy image – simple as this image itself may be – is a highly complex process involving different levels of social and psychological reality. In this, it resembles the complexities of aggression itself. Actually, the mere creation of an enemy image can in itself be regarded as a form of (psychological) aggression.

Characteristics

From the description given above, the process of creating an enemy image has diverse features.

At least, three different individuals/groups are involved: the communicator, the audience and the target. Each has specific characteristics, which interact with those of the others. Social psychologists have described many of these characteristics, such as credibility of the communicator and intelligence of the audience.

In this context, a major precondition for creating an enemy image seems to be that the audience should already have prejudices against the target group, as is often the case with people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Typically, these differences are attributed to 'bad intentions', 'stupidity' or 'fanatical mentality', in, for example, the evaluation of the non-verbal behavior of Arabs by Westerners. With a lack of personal communication, this tendency can be reinforced as no correction of the original impression takes place.

Preconditions include:

- the already mentioned prejudices;
- lack of personal communications;
- the general tendency of individuals to base evaluations of others on a few simplified impressions;
- an often dichotomous image of the world (good guys/bad guys);
- fear of strangers; and
- a fascination for 'evil' in which even the 'enemy' on the screen becomes a favorite: people 'liked' to see Saddam Hussein on TV and to get upset by the image. This can be explained, without necessarily resorting to the social psychological approach of in-group/out-group thinking, in terms of arousal needs where no real threat is present.

Apart from the already mentioned purpose to trigger a war, the establishment of an enemy image can also serve to:

- justify any form of violence;
- draw attention away from one's own side's faults and problems;
- strengthen the in-group by defining an out-group; and
- attribute the causes of frustration to a clearly defined outside source.

The following mechanisms apply:

- The other group is described as a homogeneous mass; individual differences are neglected;
- The others' complexities are reduced to simple, 'primitive' features;
- The target group is labeled in diminutive or ridiculing terms;
- In extreme cases, the other group is 'dehumanized', given animal or abstract object names and connotations in order to facilitate the willingness to attack them (typical characterizations include 'pigs', 'rats' and 'evil empire'). Visually, existing characteristics are exaggerated in caricatures and propaganda films and posters.
- A whole group of people is personalized into one simple picture of the enemy: Russians become the Russian, Americans the American. This applies even more if a single leader is at the center of attention and, for example, Saddam becomes the epitome of all Arabs, or vice versa, Bush the epitome of all Americans.
- Aggressive intentions are attributed to the other side; the in-group only defends itself.
- One often can find a mirror image: both sides use the same images and stereotypes, a favorite being Hitler. Bush identified Saddam with Hitler, Saddam did the same with Bush.
- Using formal features of the mass media to create an emotional climate (dramatic music, rousing voices, special effects).
- Facts are selected and put in a simplified context to create a one-sided cognitive belief system. To prove the necessity of 'preventing' an attack by the other side, the number of its weapons is exaggerated or strategic plans of the enemy are 'discovered'.
- Casualties on the other side are not reported or are put in abstract terms, so that any possible empathy with victims is reduced.

- Subtle forms of enemy communication include the verbal or visual construction of indirect causal links between the other's ethnic characteristics and specific behavior patterns ('Chinese kills woman').

Many of these mechanisms are often used by the modern Western media. However, in crises similar elements return even to the 'sophisticated' press, as in many reports during the Falkland Islands conflict or the Gulf war. In dictatorships or actual battle areas, they are still common, as in the war in former Yugoslavia.

Psychological Processes

A major shift in 'war communication' occurred with the omnipresence of violence in the audio-visual media in general. Physical aggression is an important ingredient of television and video. On average, American programs present ten acts of violence per hour per channel 24 hours a day. European television scores lower but still contains approximately five acts of physical aggression per channel per hour. Though the majority of these scenes stem from fictitious programs, news 'shows' have also become part of the violent diet. A special program category has been created that merges real content with the formal features of fictitious programs, so-called 'reality TV'. Without further analysis of the background one can watch the most spectacular scenes from real criminal or military events presented in a highly dramatized form, including background music, video-clip aesthetics and sensationalizing 'off' voices.

In addition, some real events seem to be tailored around the patterns of fictitious stories. The Tonya Harding-Nancy Kerrigan 'ice queen' conflict before and during the 1994 Winter Olympics had all the elements of a Hollywood movie plot and was dealt with by the media in exactly that way. The high ratings of 'reality TV' programs demonstrate their attraction. In fact war seems to be so especially 'media fit' that an exclusive 'military' channel is in the making for American television, which will contain 24 hours of war reporting from all over the world. Even without such a channel, switching through the programs demonstrates the omnipresence of war on the screen.

Can this be regarded as led solely by a normal desire for information? The reality is more complex. Violence and action of any kind are particularly attractive for program makers and the (male) audience alike as they arouse special attention by their visual and auditory intensity. At the same time, they draw a picture of a world in which complex problems can be solved by simple means. Furthermore, the idea of the strong hero may serve the identification needs of many adolescent and adult males. This is especially true when war reporting concentrates, not on the casualties' fatal consequences of military action, but on our fascination with the precise computer army technology that has partly replaced the old-fashioned hero concept. But even images that present the cruel side of war do not automatically create a negative attitude towards violence. Apart from their voyeuristic attractions, showing the same or similar war images over and over again may create habituation and decrease sensibility towards these images. The audience gets 'used' to the Bosnian war; scenes from the Vietnamese war are now sold as postcards. The quality and quantity of war communication has changed: it is a normal part of our lives. Thus, war has become a major ingredient of an overall visual programming system. What processes are involved and what effects do they have?

Processes and Effects

First, one has to distinguish between intended war communication, as described in the section on 'enemy images', and communication in which war is used as part of the program maker's entertainment policy. In the latter case, the reporting serves either the investigative goals of the journalists, or the marker orientation goal of reaching as large an audience as possible. Even then, the effects (social distance, dehumanization) can be the same as for the intended enemy image communication. This is especially true of war as part of entertainment. While there are outstanding examples of anti-war films, such as *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Die Brücke (The Bridge)* and *Apocalypse Now*, most fictitious war films presented on the screen deal with the good guy/bad guy stereotype and glorify the individual hero of a 'fascinating' technology, as in films like *Rambo* or *Red Dawn*.

These films may only attract a specific audience, i.e. the male adolescent, but for this group they provide an 'implicit war education' as opposed to one

centered around peace. The viewers may not immediately feel attracted to the subject of military engagement, but 'learn' that violence is an adequate and fascinating means of gaining control, solving conflicts and guaranteeing an upright 'moral' position. Moreover, soldiers in real wars identify with the models they have observed in Hollywood movies. News reports from Bosnia show Serbian soldiers posing with their weapons and declaring themselves to be the new 'Rambo's'. Military action is perceived as an adventure in which real men prove their 'guts'.

The messages inherent in most fictitious war films promise rewards on six different levels:

- social: one can become a hero;
- economic: one can gain material or psychological profit;
- emotional: war means excitement, adventure;
- cognitive: war is necessary to gain control in a chaotic world;
- physical: the physiological and motor activities are perceived as pleasant and exciting; and
- moral: acting/ dying as a good guy means moral payoff.

Thus, the myth of war is continued even in films that are not explicitly propaganda-oriented.

With the overall importance of violence in the media, war reporting and military fiction become part of a system in which there is a high risk of aggression-increasing effects on the audience. Applied to the military context, the following model describes the different effects of violent television. Moderated by audience variables, especially gender (primarily males are attracted); motives (sensation-seeking; mood-management orientation needs), family and upbringing, and culture, the effects of media violence on the audience are:

	Arousal	Belief in evil world	Habituation
presentation of war in the media	fictionalization of war reports	acceptance of images of enemy	media construction: war normal
has effect on perception that	war is exciting and rewarding	war is necessary	war is unavoidable

There may even be an immediate 'imitation' of behavior related to military action among children, for example with toy guns. And, as already stated, soldiers may feel attracted to fictitious war heroes and their activities. However, the major effects of war representation in the media lie in the acceptance of the 'hedonistic' qualities of war and the belief systems centered around the necessity for armed conflicts. In the long run, the dramaturgical demands of the media and their effects on the audience interact: war, due to its high arousal qualities and immediate visual 'action', is more 'media fit' than peace. It receives more attention and is thus over-represented as compared with other means of conflict resolution, which are more complex. In addition, the media, realistically, have to report about failed peace negotiations more often than about successful ones, as in the Bosnian war. The resulting message: 'war is normal'.

Industry

With audience ratings playing the dominant role in television programming, war reporting has also become part of an industry. Visual effects and being 'live' on the screen have become more important than background analysis. There are of course differences between television cultures and individual channels, but with the increasing influence of global visual agencies the available news material has become more uniform all over the world. One can even observe a partial 'fictionalization' of war reports in which it is difficult to distinguish between the dramaturgy of a movie and a news report.

During the Gulf war the use of special effects trailers, sound, jingles and videogame images made it difficult to imagine that real casualties were taking place during the event. In addition, one could buy war simulation games that enabled the audience to 'play' the attacks at home. The fact that a fictional reworking for the screen of the events of a conflict is already on the way adds further to the construction of a world in which reality and fiction merge. Cognitively, the audience may still be able to distinguish between the two, but the emotional reactions will be subject to confusion and habituation. These are the 'new qualities' of the modern media world as compared with the role of communication in the pre-mass-media world. Although one should not forget the constructive possibilities of the media – information

and the growth of cultures – the (unintended) effects of news and fiction on the promotion of war have to be acknowledged.