

The "CNN" Effect

By Walter S. Zapotoczny

Watching CNN was the way, during the Persian Gulf War, in which politicians learned about what was going on tactically in the conflict. They learned more from watching CNN than from listening to their own intelligence agencies. During the war, the intelligence agencies were reading the newspapers and watching CNN like everyone else. While the CNN coverage was a logistics wonder some at the time suggested that it is hardly the way modern wars should be fought and named this phenomenon the "CNN effect." In the paper she wrote for the U.S. Army War College Strategic Research Project titled *The CNN Effect: Strategic Enabler or Operational Risk?* Margaret H. Belknap defines The CNN as, "a theory in political science and media studies that postulates that the development of the popular 24-hour international television news channel known as Cable News Network or CNN had a major impact on the conduct of states' foreign policy in the late Cold War period and that CNN and its subsequent industry competitors have had a similar impact in the post-Cold War era." Proponents of the CNN effect argue that the extent, depth, and speed of the new global media have created a new dynamic, significantly different from that of past wars. News coverage of previous wars was certainly not like the coverage during the Persian Gulf War. The CNN effect will undoubtedly influence the conduct of future wars and decision makers will have to learn to deal with its ramifications.

During the Second World War, for example, the various outlets of popular culture behaved almost entirely as if they were the creatures of the government. The media outlets of the day spoke with one voice. Radio, popular music, films, and magazines conveyed the same optimistic messages about the war. During the war, the average listener spent four and a half hours a day concentrated on what came out of the radio speaker, and when something especially significant was expected, one sat in front of the radio and looked at it intently. In his book *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*, Paul Fussell writes, "What came from it [radio] was thoroughly censored, and it was puritan, uncorrupted, and decisively optimistic.

World War II saw newspapers and radio reign supreme in war coverage, and not coincidentally, it was one of the most popular wars in American history. Even when the home front was battle weary, there was a consensus in the country that people were fighting for a common goal. Those goals were to aid American allies in Europe and defend their interests in the Pacific arena. The government, acknowledging strong isolationist feelings in the country, tried to emphasize the importance of the war's aims. In the midst of administrative efforts to create unity, the press was no exception. The main pipelines of information for the American public were newspapers and radio. Radio in particular came into its own during the war. World War II was to be radio's hour of greatness in the light of history. Edward R. Morrow, broadcasting from London, told an American public the story of the war and tried to paint the picture with words.

Newspaper reports, which had to pass censors, were typically dispatched from the front like this one, "This is it! D-Day and What Followed" by *New York Herald Tribune* correspondent Joseph Driscoll. He emphasized the bravery of the troops. He marveled at the courage of his fellow Americans. Even when newspaper reports tried to tell of the carnage and human loss in the war, thanks to censorship by the Office of War Information, they lacked the pictures to do so. Both radio and newspapers were mediums, which did not have the same power television images, did in creating dissent among the public. Radio did have some similarities to television. It was a medium that made a more personal connection with its audience because it literally spoke to them and it was a means of relatively instant

communication. Television was not a player in the Second World War. In the middle of the war, 1942, there were only 8,000 television receivers in the nation. But people recognized the power of images to turn public opinion. Part of the reason for the war's continuing strength on the home front was the Office of War Information's ability to suppress pictures of the American dead for the first two years of the war.

In photographs of the time, no matter how severely wounded, Allied troops are never shown suffering with traumatic amputation. Everyone has all his limbs, his hands and feet and digits, not to mention expressions of courage and cheer. When they finally released more explicit pictures, it was a calculated effort to bolster support for the war because the public was war weary. They needed to maintain a desire to fight. Print and radio reports in World War II, while not all positive, were denied the impact that images would have given them. Without uncensored, primitive images, they centered on a more detached narrative. General Eisenhower in Europe and General Douglas MacArthur in the Pacific became the icons of their time and became the symbols of the military leadership of the war along with the political leadership of Franklin Roosevelt. The exploits of General Patton and Admiral Nimitz captured on newsreels, which prefaced every movie, and were followed passionately by a curious population. President Roosevelt's "fire-side chats" offered reassurance to the news-hungry nation and re-assured people that their sacrifices were worth it. During the Korean War and prior to the Vietnam War, the American press had generally supported national war efforts and the national leadership with positive stories. Up to the Vietnam War, the ways in which the media reported news differed little from the ways news was covered during World War II.

The war in Vietnam was an influential event in military-media relations. It marked the first television coverage of war and a monumental shift in relations between the media and the American military. It also marks the last time reporters enjoyed free access and no censorship in an American war. Americans saw battle scenes with real soldiers, not John Wayne or Errol Flynn, but real soldiers as actors on the screen. The evening network news brought images of American soldiers killing, American soldiers being wounded and killed, displaced civilians, and destroyed Vietnam villages into American living rooms on a nightly basis. These images were more powerful than any print medium could ever be. And these images were America's first experience with "real" war images since no war had been fought on American soil since the Civil War. The images of the war influenced public opinion and eventually lead to the end of the war.

The overwhelming lesson from Vietnam seemed to have been, "Keep the press out!" Grenada offered the military the opportunity to do just that. Grenada, a small island located south of Barbados in the Caribbean, presented itself to the military as an opportunity to easily control access to the area of operations. President Reagan left the decision for media access to the military and, ultimately, it rested with the operational commander, Admiral Metcalf. He banned reporters from Grenada, which infuriated them. A few journalists managed to get a small boat to transport them from Barbados. As they approached Grenada, Admiral Metcalf personally ordered shots fired across the bow of the media's vessel. The vessel turned around and returned to Barbados with the American media members aboard fuming. Metcalf's plan was to allow the press in after the operation was complete. But, under pressure from the press and Congress, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered Admiral Metcalf to accommodate reporters starting on the third day of the operation, 28 October 1983. In Grenada, the military felt confident that they could control media access by controlling "pools" of reporters. The media was pleased that the Chairman formally instructed commanders to plan to incorporate the media in its operations from the earliest planning stages.

The Panama story showed CNN just how alluring live coverage of a crisis could be. CNN now had the technology, the skills and money to go live anywhere in the world. The military felt confident that they could control media access by controlling "pools" of reporters. The media was pleased that the commanders actually incorporated the media in its operations from the earliest planning stages. But, planning for the media in Operation Just Cause translated to keeping the media in the dark to ensure secrecy and then allowing a tightly controlled media pool in country after the start of hostilities. The military provided little support to the media. Without transportation the media could not get the whole story. To get that live coverage, reporters realized they could not confine themselves to press pools controlled by the government. To prepare for the next war, correspondents would need to be less dependent on the government for access, communications, and transportation. Information technologies put the reporters back on the battlefield in the Gulf War and this time they were live.

Fifteen years after the end of Vietnam, American forces deployed to the Persian Gulf in what turned out to be an overwhelmingly successful operation. The American people were surprised that the military was so strong, so ready and so effective. Operation Desert Storm was the most widely and most swiftly reported war in history. In addition to being the first CNN War and creating the CNN effect, this war also marked a turning point in military-media relations and a turning point for Americans' view of that relationship. The press was imbedded with military units and able to have the same experiences as the soldiers they reported about.

In an age of multiple 24-hour cable news networks together with satellite technology, the CNN effect will exert even greater pressures on the tension between the military's desire to limit their exposure to combat and the media's desire to be in the front lines. In future wars, the strategic leader and war fighter will have to understand these tensions and how to balance the military's need to control information as a matter of operational security with the media's desire to inform the public. It is also important for strategic leaders and war fighters to understand the media as a potent force multiplier in a wide variety of areas. Live, 24/7 broadcast media operations puts tremendous pressure on strategic decision making. The power of images to shape perceptions is far greater than print media and reaches a broader audience. This together with the speed at which a highly competitive cable news industry is bringing these images to the public is increasing pressure at the strategic level to react quickly.

Decision-making in a rapidly changing environment where the decision makers are at odds with the press with respect to time are a huge challenge. The media is operating on a 24-hour news cycle while the strategic leader needs time to think, to respond, and to direct action. In wars of the future the strategic leaders and war fighters will have to learn to make decisions in real time within the context of a complex dynamically changing environment.

Adams writes, "In the absence of an emerging consensus for the future of international law in the electronic age, the voice of those who believe the liberating nature of information will provide answers should be heard, for the power of information to create the paradigm we are searching for has already been witnessed. It was television that fueled the collapse of communism. 'The world sees you!' protestors in Prague chanted at the riot police who in another age might have brutally suppressed them. But the world really did see them, through the cameras of CNN."

The "CNN Effect" will influence decision makers in future wars. In the future, the CNN effect will, in some instances, create an acceleration of policy. In other instances, it can be an

impediment to policy. It may be a dialogue between diplomats taking place instantaneously. In other circumstances, it could be a dialogue between warring parties. In future wars, it may very well be a dialogue between soldiers on the ground. The CNN effect is bound to have substantial influence on the wars of the future.

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