

War journalists and forces of gatekeeping during the escalation and the de-escalation periods of the Iraq War

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Abstract

Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, war journalists have reported news from the battlefields and streets of Baghdad to the world audiences. As the violent conflict in Iraq winds down, so do the war reporting operations in Iraq. Based on in-depth interviews with 23 war correspondents, this study investigates gatekeeping forces that affected the journalists' news coverage of the Iraq War. The study found that the war journalists singled out personal judgment, an individual-level gatekeeping force, to be the most salient element in reporting the escalation period of the Iraq War. However, the journalists responded that financial constraints and deference to audience interest, organizational-level, and social institutional-level gatekeeping forces determined the direction and the volume of the war reporting more saliently during the de-escalation period of the Iraq War.

Keywords

De-escalation, escalation, gatekeeping, Iraq War, journalistic norm, war journalists

Life and death of war stories

More than 600 journalists were embedded and traveled with the US and the British military troops when the United States and Britain invaded Iraq in March 2003 (Pfau et al., 2004; Whitman, 2003). Between mid-2003 and 2007, security situations in Iraq

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deteriorated as deadly insurgent attacks, suicide bombings, and the Sunni–Shiite sectarian strife grew dramatically. With increasing violence all over Iraq, US and foreign news organizations strengthened their news coverage of Iraq and opened up their news bureaus in and out of Baghdad to report war stories during this period, which is the escalation period of the Iraq War. A number of journalists continued to embed themselves with the US, British, and other Coalition military troops, although they also reported the war as unilateral reporters. The Iraq War continued to be a main staple of news stories in the US news media.

Throughout 2007, a US surge strategy was implemented with the deployment of an additional 30,000 troops to Iraq. By early 2008, the insurgent attacks and sectarian violence declined and US troop casualty figures dropped gradually in Iraq (Ricks and Biddle, 2009). In addition, the presidential race in the US dominated the news agenda, and newly elected US President Barak Obama promised to shift his war effort from Iraq to Afghanistan. During this de-escalation period of the Iraq War, the US news organizations also scaled down their news operations in the country significantly and the volume of news coverage on the Iraq War quickly declined (Arraf, 2009; Jamail, 2010; Ricchiardi, 2008). By August 2010, all US combat troops have completed their withdrawal from Iraq by leaving behind 50,000 US military advisors and trainers who are scheduled to leave the country by the end of 2011. US President Barak Obama declared that the combat mission in Iraq has ended (Cooper and Stolberg, 2010).

The purpose of this study is to compare the Iraq War journalists' perceptions of embedded and unilateral reporting, and to investigate the gatekeeping factors that shaped their news coverage during the escalation period (from 2003 to 2007) and the de-escalation period (from 2008 to 2010) of the Iraq War. Of particular interest in this study is whether the war journalists perceive similar or different gatekeeping forces in their news reporting due to their individual and organizational characteristics.

Theoretical background

Embedded vs unilateral reporting

The US embedded reporting program during the Iraq War was created by the Pentagon to accommodate news organizations that sought to cover the war from the front lines, alongside the troops (Pfau et al., 2004; Whitman, 2003). The Pentagon initially tested the embedding program in Afghanistan in 2002, but expanded the program fully to accommodate nearly 800 embedding slots for journalists. Eventually, more than 600 slots were taken when the invasion of Iraq began (Whitman, 2003). The opposite concept of embedded reporting is unilateral reporting by which journalists cover war stories by traveling independently without logistical support, physical protection, or access to military operations.

Advocates of embedded reporting argue that it enabled journalists to get maximum access to the military, and provided in-depth coverage with dramatic visuals and first-hand accounts of combats (Ganey, 2004; Kelley, 2003; Ricchiardi, 2003). In an online survey of 159 embedded journalists, Fahmy and Johnson (2005) found that the respondents evaluated their news reporting positively although they agreed that their reports

were narrow in scope. The embedded journalists also reported that they experienced little censorship from the military.

However, critics of embedded reporting argue that it was motivated by the Pentagon's public relations efforts to usher journalists into developing amicable relationships with the soldiers and thus forsake objectivity in their news reporting (Bennett et al., 2007; Seib, 2006; Tumber, 2004). The critics also argue that embedded reporting led to a myopic perspective of the war since it relied heavily on the accounts of journalists who were restricted in their movement and were overly dependent on the troops not only for information but also for basic survival (Bennett et al., 2007; Brandenburg, 2007; Burnett, 2003; Zeide, 2005). Tumber (2004) argues that when correspondents are 'embedded' among their own country's military, their journalistic values of impartiality and objectivity can be misplaced. Pfau et al. (2004, 2005) also suggest that embedded reporting was a flawed experiment that served the purposes of the military but not of the journalists.

Supporters of unilateral reporting argue that unilateral reporters can minimize possible biases and conflict of interest in their news reporting, while avoiding restrictions imposed by military units. Due to the absence of the military protection, however, Carroll (2005) and Simpson (2003) argue that unilateral journalists were killed, injured, or kidnapped more frequently than the embedded journalists in the battlefields.

The more violence, the more frequent the news coverage

Scholars (Hess, 1996; Perlmutter, 1998) have argued that news stories about a war are considered most newsworthy when they include two critical elements, acute violence and compelling visuals. Sometimes, the critical elements are disastrous or negative news events such as 'coups and earthquakes' (Rosenblum, 1979). Television news, in particular, loves drama, and the drama does require conflict (Hallin, 1986). The dramatic surge or decline of violence during the war often determines how many war journalists are committed to covering it. For example, American television news audiences watched one of the most dramatic episodes of the Vietnam War during the Tet Offensive in 1968. After this spurt of battles, the overall news coverage started declining in the following de-escalation period. Following the My Lai massacre and the withdrawal of some US troops, Sullivan (2006) argued that the US news organizations began losing interest in the war. In 1968, the number of accredited war correspondents in Vietnam was 637. By 1970, the number had dropped to 392 and in 1972 to 295 (Sullivan, 2006). When the last US troops left Vietnam in March 1973, merely a handful of reporters covered the story in the field.

War reporting and gatekeeping

Studies on war reporting suggest that a variety of factors influence the war journalists' selection of particular news stories and the adoption of specific news gathering practices. According to Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) hierarchical model of gatekeeping, five levels of gatekeeping forces, represented by individual-level, journalistic routine-level, organizational-level, social institutional-level, and social system-level forces, come into play in news gathering and selection processes. Gatekeeping theory in the context of

news has evolved mainly into a focus on the decision-making process of editors, following White's (1950) classic news gatekeeping study about Mr Gates the newspaper wire editor. However, as observed by Bass (1969), news gatherers (reporters) are different from news processors (editors). Bass argued that researchers should focus more attention on news gathering than on news processing, simply because stories that are not reported will never enter the processing channel in the first place.

For embedded journalists during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, studies (Fahmy and Johnson, 2005; Shin et al., 2005) found that individual-level gatekeeping forces such as personal values or professional norms, years of experience, and professional role conceptions play important roles in their reporting. Journalistic routine-level gatekeeping forces such as judgment on newsworthiness and credibility of news sources are also important considerations for US news editors in their news selection decisions on the Iraq War (Shin et al., 2005). Tumber (2002) suggests that journalistic routines such as deadlines, problems of access, and speed of events oftentimes put immense pressures on war journalists and thus undermine their objectivity and accuracy.

Organizational-level gatekeeping forces dictate that news organizations, rather than individual journalists, play more important roles in deciding which news stories be published or aired. In their study of NBC network's broadcasting of the street execution of a Vietcong suspect during the 1968 Tet Offensive, Bailey and Lichty (1972) found that the decision to air the controversial film was made primarily by group editorial decisions within the NBC news organization, rather than by individual editors or journalists. Arnett (1998) and Ricchiardi (2008) argue that financial constraints within US news organizations tend to force them to scale down their international news coverage, including war coverage, by reducing the number of foreign correspondents and shutting down overseas news bureaus.

As to social institutional-level gatekeeping forces, studies suggest that journalists depend heavily on elite sources, including government officials or military leaders, during national crises and wars (e.g., Bennett et al., 2007; Entman and Page, 1994; McChesney, 2002; Moeller, 2004). The overreliance of journalists on the official sources thwarted the coverage of dissenting voices that could have neutralized government spins and could have prevented the American military interventions in Grenada, Panama, and the Persian Gulf (see Dickson, 1995; Entman and Page, 1994). News editors' deference to audiences' interest also affect journalists' news reporting on the war. News audiences will evidently experience war fatigue after many years of recurring themes that deal with suicide bombings and sectarian violence, which then leads news editors to reduce the amount of war stories (Ricchiardi, 2008).

Studies on the Iraq War reporting have explored how embedded or unilateral journalists perceived their roles (Aday et al., 2005; Fahmy and Johnson, 2007), what types of gatekeeping forces were salient in their news reporting (Fahmy and Johnson, 2005; Shin et al., 2005), and whether or not embedded journalists' reporting was affected by government spins (Pfau et al., 2004, 2005; Tumber, 2004). Many studies have focused on the performances of the embedded journalists during the escalation period of the Iraq War between 2003 and 2007, but few studies have attempted to investigate the subsequent de-escalation period, or compare how war journalists, either embedded or unilateral, perceive their war reporting practices as well as investigate various gatekeeping

forces affecting their war reporting throughout the seven-year war. This study is an attempt to explore war journalists' attitudes toward embedding and unilateral reporting practices during their news reporting during the escalation period (2003–2007) and the de-escalation period (2008–2010) of the Iraq War, and explicate which levels of gatekeeping forces affected their news reporting in each period most saliently. This approach allows for a more complete understanding of journalists' news selection and coverage of the Iraq War.

Research questions

Based on the literature on the Iraq War reporting, embedded and unilateral reporting, and gatekeeping theory, this study investigates the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the attitudes of war journalists toward embedded and unilateral reporting practices in Iraq?

RQ2: Which level(s) of gatekeeping forces did war journalists perceive most saliently in their news reporting during the escalation period of the Iraq War (between 2003 and 2007)?

RQ3: Which level(s) of gatekeeping forces did war journalists perceive most saliently in their news reporting during the de-escalation period of the Iraq War (between 2008 and 2010)?

Method

For this study, 23 journalists who reported the Iraq War were interviewed between March and June 2010. The selection of interviewees was opportunistic. The names of war journalists (without their organizational affiliations and contact information) were obtained from an unofficial list of embedded and unilateral journalists provided by the US military sources. More names of journalists were added later after compiling various Iraq War news stories from print, broadcast, and online news outlets. The researcher then conducted extensive research using data search and retrieval devices such as LexisNexis and EBSCOhost, which helped identify more than 200 journalists' organizational affiliations through their bylines. In selecting prospective interviewees, considerations were given in terms of representing news organizations from both national and local news markets, as well as comparing print vs broadcasting media outlets. The selection of interviewees was limited to journalists who actually traveled to Iraq at various points of time between 2003 and 2010. Those who merely wrote war stories from the Pentagon or from their home offices in the United States or the United Kingdom without visiting the battlefield in Iraq were excluded. A total of 75 journalists were contacted by email to participate in the interviews. Of the 75 journalists contacted, 23 journalists agreed to participate in the interviews. Twenty journalists were interviewed by telephone and three journalists who were stationed overseas were interviewed by email upon their personal requests.

The in-depth interviews were conducted by the author and a graduate student, who also helped transcribe the interviews. The telephone interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 1 hour 50 minutes each. The length of email interviews ranged from 3500 to 5100 words. The transcripts were analyzed following Strauss and Corbin's (1990) approach,

by identifying the themes emerging from the raw data, followed by axial and selective coding. The lengths of verbal content ranged from a single word such as 'dangerous' to describe the interviewee's judgment of embedded reporting and unilateral reporting to several lines of block quotations that describe a particular incident illustrating the interviewee's personal experience as a war correspondent in Iraq. The fragmentary words were reorganized and regrouped to reflect common themes to answer each research question.

The 23 war journalists: Who are they?

The 23 interviewed journalists represented news organizations operating in national and local media markets: 22 of them worked for US news organizations while covering the Iraq War. One journalist worked for the BBC. Among the 23 interviewed, 12 journalists worked for local news media, and the other 11 journalists worked for national news media during their reporting assignments in Iraq. Three journalists are foreign correspondents currently stationed overseas. The majority of the journalists are veteran war journalists with multiple war reporting experiences under their belts, including Angola, Somalia, Congo, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Yugoslavia, Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Many are renowned award-winning journalists. Three of the print journalists – Marcus Stern, Sharon Schmickle, and Cheryl Diaz Meyer – are Pulitzer Prize winners, two of whom won Pulitzers for their reporting on the Iraq War. One television reporter, Kimberly Dozier of CBS Network, won a Peabody Award and an RTNDA/Edward R Murrow Award for her reporting on the Iraq War.

The average journalistic experience for these journalists is 23.4 years, with the longest work experience being 35 years, the shortest 10 years. Although most journalists traveled to Iraq for a relatively short period, between two to six weeks in each assignment, four of them are former Baghdad bureau correspondents who operated in and out of Iraq for up to three years. All the interviewed journalists covered the Iraq War during the escalation period (2003–2007), and 10 of them continued to cover the war during the de-escalation period (2008–2010) either as embedded or unilateral journalists. Nearly half of the journalists (11) have had only embedded reporting experience, two journalists have had only unilateral reporting experience, and 10 journalists have experienced both embedded and unilateral reporting. The profiles of the journalists interviewed are presented in Table 1.

The following section reports the findings. Comments are not linked to specific journalists or organizations. Quotation marks within the text denote verbatim speech by the interviewees.

Findings

RQ1: What are the attitudes of war journalists toward embedded and unilateral reporting practices in Iraq?

There was a clear divide among the journalists on their assessments of the embedded reporting. The journalists who had longer and more frequent embedding experiences than others tend to support embedded reporting as an essential tool in covering the Iraq

Table 1. Profiles of interviewed war journalists.

Names	Years of experience	Embed/ Unilateral	Job affiliation (while in Iraq)	Job title (while in Iraq)
1. Alisa ^a	18	E/U	Local newspaper	Reporter
2. Anne Garrels	35	U	National Public Radio	Reporter
3. Brian Murphy	30	U	Associated Press	Reporter
4. Cheryl Diaz Meyer	20	E	<i>Dallas Morning News</i>	Photographer
5. Chris Tomlinson	18	E	Associated Press	Reporter
6. Dan Murphy	16	E/U	<i>Christian Science Monitor</i>	Reporter
7. Don Dahler	28	E	ABC News	Reporter/anchor
8. Doug Vogt ^b	30	E/U	ABC News	Videographer
9. Jim Muir	35	E/U	BBC News	Reporter
10. John ^a	12	E	Local newspaper	Reporter
11. Kevin Sites	21	E/U	CNN, Yahoo	Reporter/producer
12. Kimberly Dozier ^b	22	E/U	CBS News	Reporter
13. Kirk Spitzer ^b	25	E	CBS News	Reporter/producer
14. Marcus Stern	31	E/U	Copley News Service	Editor
15. Mark Johnson	21	E	<i>Charlotte Observer</i>	Reporter
16. Maureen ^a	28	E/U	Local newspaper	Reporter
17. Matthew Schofield	27	E/U	McClatchy Newspapers	Reporter
18. Miguel Navrot	10	E	<i>Albuquerque Journal</i>	Reporter
19. Rick Leventhal	24	E	FOX News	Reporter
20. Sam ^a	19	E	Local newspaper	Reporter
21. Scott Cannon	15	E	<i>Kansas City Star</i>	Reporter
22. Sharon Schmickle	27	E/U	McClatchy Newspapers	Reporter
23. Sig Christenson	27	E/U	<i>San Antonio Express-News</i>	Reporter

E: embedded; U: unilateral. ^aThe interviewee requested her/his identity to remain anonymous. A pseudonym was used. ^bThe interviewee was injured during a reporting assignment in Iraq; recovered after medical treatment and recuperation.

War. The journalists who had both unilateral and embedding reporting experiences tend to evaluate embedding to be helpful to gain access to the military troops, but they acknowledge that the reporting method provides a 'one-sided view' of the conflict. The journalists who had longer and more frequent unilateral reporting experiences expressed their reluctance and reservations about the value of embedded reporting for its lack of independence from the official news sources.

More access to the military and common soldiers. Specifically, several journalists who embedded repeatedly suggest that embedding could provide the only possible option in reporting the US military in Iraq. One newspaper reporter says that the access is 'phenomenal,' and it has provided an 'unprecedented view from the battlefield' with 'very little direct oversight or attempts to control journalists.' Another newspaper reporter says he had 'amazing access and amazing success,' and was able to tell great stories. A television journalist who has embedded seven times in total reiterates, 'It is impossible to cover any war or armed conflict without embedded reporting. The only way to see what US troops are doing, and to see how a war is being conducted on the ground, is to live and

travel with the troops.’ Another television reporter recalls how embedding provided him with an up-close and personal aspect of military troops: ‘I ate with [the Marines], I slept with them, and I was able to observe the war being fought.’ These journalists argue the embedding opened previously off-limits military operations to public scrutiny, and helped journalists to report ‘humanistic episodes’ of common soldiers that many journalists had hoped to witness first-hand for a long time since Vietnam.

Fending off criticisms that the embedded reporting lacks independence, several embedded journalists say that by being on the ground journalists ‘can get things they can’t get by being in Washington’ or by working as unilateral journalists. One newspaper reporter provides this endorsement: ‘It’s not a substitute for having people at the Pentagon who are able to cover the war with a broader sweep. I think being embedded was sort of complementary to other coverage.’ The mission of embedded reporters, according to several journalists, is clearly different, with a focus on covering ‘slices’ or ‘snippets’ of the war stories rather than showing the broader picture of the war and policy implications. A local newspaper reporter says, ‘I wasn’t over there to find out if there really were WMDs, or we were being cruel to the Iraqi people or any of that stuff. The *New York Times* can handle that.’

One local newspaper journalist recalls that his editor told him specifically: ‘Let’s really try to focus on the viewpoint of the soldiers. Let’s really look at this from the Ernie Pyle perspective.’ Several embedded journalists in this study demonstrated their positive attitudes toward the US military personnel by describing them as ‘grown-up Eagle Scouts,’ or ‘interesting people doing pretty incredible things.’ One newspaper reporter says he ‘was impressed by the thoughtful soldiers’ he was embedded with, and eventually ‘developed a respect for’ them. Another reporter recalls what his main focus of the stories was during his embedding:

I set myself the task of telling the story of soldiers. I told soldier stories, and I didn’t get into the politics, I didn’t get into war right or wrong. I wanted to tell the stories of the young men and women who were in uniform and fighting this war.

These perspectives of the journalists may help explain how decades-old cynicism, general distrust, and enmity between the US military and the media were diminished during the Iraq War. A local newspaper reporter says, ‘For the first time since World War II, we were able to establish trust [with the military].’

Unilateral reporting: A different side of the story. On the contrary, the journalists who reported as unilateral more frequently and/or who happened to have more than three decades of reporting experiences in this study expressed more outright and negative views on embedded reporting. For these journalists, embedded reporting could provide merely a ‘microscopic view’ or ‘tunnel-vision’ of the ‘small individual movements which happen to satisfy the American audience by giving a voyeuristic view of what’s going on in the battlefield.’ A former network television journalist says, ‘Embedded reporting gives you an absolutely essential, first-hand view, but it’s a narrow view. You cannot see the big picture from a foot patrol in Baghdad.’ One news agency journalist also says:

In the early years of the war, the embedded reporting offered the potential to see the war from the soldiers' eyes. Good reporters took advantage of this opportunity and came away with evocative and timeless war coverage. But all too often, the embed journalist became absorbed by the moment and became a cheerleader – or at least a self-censored observer – for the military unit.

Similar views are shared by a newspaper investigative journalist who says that he refused to be embedded with the troops:

I generally stayed as unilateral. I don't like to be embedded. My preference is not cover the military but cover the battlefield, particularly focusing on the civilians on the battlefield. Certainly, we need more reporting on what's happening on the ground rather than just what's happening inside the military garrisons or convoys.

Physical safety as a critical consideration. As evidenced by the experiences of war journalists Ernie Pyle, David Bloom, and Terry Lloyd, war journalists put their names in the news headlines if they are injured or killed. For example, *Christian Science Monitor* freelancer Jill Carroll was kidnapped by an Iraqi militant group and held hostage for three months until she was released (Carroll, 2006). In January 2006, ABC news anchor Bob Woodruff and videographer Doug Vogt (one of the journalists interviewed in this study) were critically injured when a roadside bomb exploded next to the US Army vehicle they were riding in. Both journalists received multiple brain surgeries and spent several months in recuperation before returning to work (Oppel and Steinberg, 2006). In May 2006, CBS correspondent Kimberly Dozier (another journalist interviewed in this study) was injured when a car bomb exploded in a Baghdad street while covering a US Army patrol. Two CBS camera crew were killed in the same blast (Dozier, 2007). The physical threats frequently come from unfriendly Iraqi militant groups but sometimes from US or British troops. ITN war correspondent Terry Lloyd was killed by US gunfire in Basra while reporting the siege of the city in March 2003 (Tryhorn, 2006). The poor security situation on the ground such as suicide bombings, roadside bombings, kidnappings, or murders is cited as one of the most serious restrictions war journalists faced in Iraq (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2008, 2010).

Safety as a main advantage. Three journalists point to the reliance on embedding as a practical means to ensure safety of journalists as they witnessed growing violence throughout Iraq during the escalation period of the war between 2003 and 2007. A television videographer who was stationed at a Baghdad news bureau explains:

Embedded reporting is the only way to travel in Iraq safely and also to experience what soldiers are doing. You have to be a part of the operation. If you didn't do that, you would be running a very high risk, to be attacked or kidnapped, which happened to many journalists.

Another television reporter said that embedding was one of few options she had as a Baghdad bureau correspondent during the violent years prior to the troop surge in 2007:

When there was a high kidnapping threat, car bomb threats, you have to weigh your options. . . . You have to weigh your interviews, not only for your security, your crew, and your translator, but also for what's happening to [Iraqi] people you interview.

The embedded journalists in this study agreed that they focused mostly on the US and British military and their combat operations, and consequently, had little freedom to venture out into the streets and interview Iraqi civilians. One journalist says the choices for war journalists are severely hampered by the 'physical danger of working independently in a country where it is difficult to identify the enemy.' The physical danger can be imposed by multiple players, such as the Sunni insurgent groups, the Shiite militias, the local criminals, or the US military (Ghosh, 2006; Kim and Hama-Saeed, 2008; McLeary, 2006). Several journalists responded that they would feel safer to be embedded with the military, although that means they cover war stories from the military perspective. To work from the Iraqi civilian perspective means that they have to risk their lives in the most extreme way.

Flak jackets and bodyguards. From time to time, news reports from Iraq documented the immense risks journalists face during their day-to-day news gathering activities. A network videographer who stayed at a Baghdad news bureau explains:

After 2004, when you were traveling in cities in Iraq, you were traveling with armed bodyguards. We did go out unilaterally with our bodyguards, but it was a difficult situation. Even if we had an arranged interview, it has to be done very quickly while being alert to potential threat. I always kept my eyes open while I was working. You have to do things very quickly, get in and get out quickly, and return to your bureau.

According to two television journalists in this study, three US network television organizations – ABC, CBS, and NBC – hired and shared a group of security guards armed with automatic rifles whenever they went out to cover news stories independently. One broadcaster said:

Print reporters could go in a low-key civilian dress, stay with their translator driving. Broadcasters are different; you have a correspondent, a cameraman, and a sound man, sometimes a producer, a translator, and an Iraqi driver. It's a big footprint. We had to switch our armored four-wheel-drive vehicles with armored sedans. We all looked like [US officials] working in the Green Zone. We were in the Red Zone, and we didn't want to be confused with the US officials. Even [the] armored sedans made us look like a valuable target.

However, smaller news organizations cannot afford this type of costly security protection. A newspaper journalist agrees that physical danger is one of the most difficult challenges he faced while reporting in Baghdad, especially without bodyguards: 'When I move around, I move around very discreetly. I have a car, driver, and an interpreter. I keep a low profile and do other things not to draw any attention.' According to Robert Fisk (2005), many western journalists in Baghdad could not afford to hire bodyguards, and thus had to hole themselves up in their news bureaus by using news agency

photographs or stories supplied by their local Iraqi staff. According to Fisk, this hostage-like style of war reporting practice, or 'hotel journalism,' is a stark reality of the Iraq War coverage.

RQ2: Which level(s) of gatekeeping forces did war journalists perceive most saliently in their news reporting during the escalation period of the Iraq War (between 2003 and 2007)?

Personal judgments. Most journalists in this study rated their own individual judgment, an individual-level gatekeeping force, as highly important in their news reporting in Iraq. One television journalist explains: 'I had a great deal of freedom to report what I found to be the story. [The] Overall guideline was my own judgment to what the story was and how to report it.' Similar views are shared by other journalists. One newspaper reporter says, 'News happens, and if it's significant, we cover it.' Another newspaper reporter also concurred: 'We had a quite a lot of freedom in terms of our editors. They really followed our lead.'

One newspaper reporter recounts how the significant time zone difference between him and his editor made him more dependent on his own news judgment rather than close consultations with his editors. This journalist says, 'We were pretty independent of editorial guidance from the newspaper. That worked out really well and we were quite fortunate.' Close interaction with news editors at the home office is often too much to ask, according to the war journalists interviewed, unless they decide to spend hours per day to consult with their bosses spending hundreds of dollars on satellite phone bills. Most of time, the journalists say, they would work not only as news reporters but also as news editors in the battlefield. To a veteran war journalist who covered Iraq several times, the question of who decides which story to cover is fairly simple because nobody in the newsroom knows the subject better than him:

We knew generally what we were going to write about before boarding the plane [to Iraq]. I'm the guy who tends to know what's going on and so I'm going to be the one who comes forward and says, 'These are my story ideas.'

Among the journalists in this study, journalistic routine-level forces such as perceived newsworthiness or deadline pressures are considered as less significant. A newspaper reporter who is a former Baghdad bureau chief says, 'I was never under any deadline pressures. . . . I had a great deal of freedom to report what I found to be the story.' Similarly, the organizational-level gatekeeping forces such as collaborations with news editors and senior journalists, and editorial policies of news organizations are found to be less salient among the journalists in this study than the individual-level gatekeeping forces as one television reporter recalls:

It is important to talk directly to editorial staff in New York, but sometimes what they want you to do are simply not possible because of the danger in the field. Most of the time, story ideas come from the journalists in the field who suggest their story ideas back to editors in their main office.

RQ3: Which level(s) of gatekeeping forces did war journalists perceive most saliently in their news reporting during the de-escalation period of the Iraq War (2008 and 2010)?

Shrinking audience interest. Between mid-2007 and early 2008, the Iraqi insurgent attacks and sectarian violence subsided dramatically as the US troop surge and the Sunni Awakening project were in progress in an effort to improve overall security situations in Iraq. As the dramatic stories of battles and violence dropped, and the number of US military casualties decreased, the news audience's as well as the news organizations' interest in the war also evaporated. Compared to over 600 embedded journalists in Iraq during the 2003 invasion, there were 219 embedded journalists in September 2007, which dropped to a mere 39 embedded reporters in September 2008 (Mooney, 2008). Between 2007 and 2008, the volume of Iraq news coverage by the major US networks declined by more than one-tenth (Ricchiardi, 2008).

One television reporter in this study reiterates the overall mentality of network executives who are sensitive to ratings: 'News is driven by ratings, we all know. And they're tracking it by [the] minute. When they see the ratings about the Iraq War, the ratings dives, then they do less coverage about Iraq.' One newspaper reporter recalls what he discovered during his two different reporting assignments in Iraq, one in 2004 and the other in 2009:

Remember the press conferences they'd hold? . . . This is more of a 2004 thing. They have these big concert halls, and they had several hundred people in there. The last time I was there [in 2009] they called all the American press together. We met around a kitchen table. So there's no one left. There's just nothing going on there any more.

Another television journalist says that reporters now rarely paid visits to, and give very little amount of coverage to developments in Iraq. He says, 'There is obviously Iraq fatigue, financial stringency, and so on, but it is still a source of surprise.'

Financial constraints: Downsizing and restaffing in Baghdad. What was found salient during the de-escalation period is that the organizational-level gatekeeping forces such as financial constraints of news organizations drive the overall volume of news coverage of the Iraq War significantly. Several journalists interviewed argue that covering Iraq is expensive for any news organization, and many organizations cannot afford to maintain their news bureaus, not to mention correspondents in the field. During the same time, the economic recession forced a number of US news organizations to scale down their news operations by reducing the number of journalists and downsizing or shutting down their Baghdad news bureaus. In fact, more than five journalists in this study revealed that they are no longer full-time journalists. One former newspaper journalist who left the news business in 2009 recalls:

Covering Iraq is very expensive. With all the equipment it takes to get that story just to happen. This is a time when for-profit news organizations really have to look hard to figure out how they are going to continue doing what they do in terms of providing news.

One Baghdad bureau television correspondent recalled the immense pressures from working short-handed while reporting unilaterally and embedding with the US military:

[My TV network] chose to economize by going down to just one correspondent at the bureau. That means you'll take up more work. So for the six weeks in Baghdad, you don't sleep much, have a lot of work. In Baghdad, the morning news came on at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. You go out to do your early show live shot. You grab another interview and stand-up toward the nightfall.

Some news organizations pulled out their reporters entirely but left one or two local Iraqi staff to run the bureaus. One news agency reporter says that the news coverage of Iraq during the de-escalation period is 'just absent,' and news organizations are putting little effort into covering the war any more. Another newspaper reporter says, 'There are some incredible stories to be done out of Iraq. There's almost no one left to do them.'

The financial constraints forced some journalists to re-evaluate the hidden value of the embedded reporting as a more realistic, affordable alternative to costly unilateral reporting. One network television journalist says:

Embedding – as compared to unilateral reporting – is beneficial for the networks that have immense financial challenges of running the news bureaus, subsidizing on their bodyguards and armored vehicles. That's why some journalists prefer to be embedded to make their assignments more financially feasible.

Depending on the type of assignment and the duration of the embedding, the journalists interviewed estimated that the total cost their news organizations paid to support a single embedded reporter ranged from \$7000 to \$15,000 per assignment, significant sums of money that drain news budgets.

Restrictions on showing troop casualties. Most journalists who were embedded in the 2003–2007 escalation period reported little restriction enforced by the military public affairs officers or field commanders during their embedded reporting. Unlike the Gulf War of 1991, no security reviews (i.e., screening of news stories) were required during the Iraq War. The only restrictions specified in the embed rules include not showing images of US casualties, especially until their next of kin has been notified, and not reporting troop movements, sizes, or locations (Combined Joint Task Force 7, 2003). On several occasions during the 2003 invasion, the embedded reporters could even file stories about the terrible mistakes of the US military personnel such as the accidental shooting of Iraqi civilians at various US checkpoints (Katovsky and Carlson, 2003). One interviewed journalist says, 'I was allowed to go pretty much [with] every unit except when they were doing something that involved a great deal of stealth. . . . No, I didn't feel like I was restrained at all.' However, several journalists who were embedded since 2008, which marks the beginning of the de-escalation period of the war, say they actually were pressured to show their stories or photographs to field commanders.

The most serious restrictions were placed on the embedded journalists when they were covering US casualties. Three journalists told this researcher that they experienced

numerous restrictions when they were filming US casualties. Two of them are television journalists and the third a newspaper reporter. One television reporter who also videotaped during his assignment recalls:

Three Marines were killed and several others were maimed in the incident. I was filming from a distance. None of the casualties would have been identifiable, and thus I was acting within the ground rule. However, one of the casualties had been a very popular commander and many of his men were very upset, and very emotional.

Unlike previous studies in which most embedded journalists responded that they had experienced little censorship or restrictions from the military during the 2003 invasion (see Fahmy and Johnson, 2005), this study did find a significant number of episodic but meaningful restrictions imposed on the embedded journalists in the more recent de-escalation period of the Iraq War. For instance, the US military in Iraq revised their embed regulations, titled 'Media Ground Rules,' in 2008. The new embed rules made it harder for journalists to accompany troops on combat missions and to interview military personnel. Publishing photos of US casualties is not a violation of the new embedding rules but journalists were disembedded from various US military units after they photographed or ran images of dead soldiers (Kamber and Arango, 2008).

The latest embed rules, which were revised again in 2010, stipulate that embedded journalists are not allowed to report names, video, or photographs of a wounded military service member without her or his prior written consent (United States Forces-Iraq, 2010a). In case of a soldier killed in action, embedded journalists cannot use names and other identifiable descriptions of the soldier until they acquire approval from the soldier's family. In the old media ground rules, the embedded journalists were asked to wait 72 hours until the military notified the fallen soldier's next of kin. The latest embedding application procedures (United States Forces-Iraq, 2010b) also require journalists to submit three published (or broadcast) samples of their work and story ideas, something that could be considered as prior censorship, before they are accredited for embedding by the US military.

A news agency reporter complains about the stringent restrictions: 'I am not a big fan [of embedded reporting] in recent years. The US military controls are too great and the options for independent reporting are few.' One newspaper reporter was 'astounded' at finding noticeable changes in the media embedding rules during his last reporting trip to Iraq in 2008:

By the last time I visited Iraq, the military cracked down on embedded reporters and set so many rules and so many restrictions, that it was no longer useful, unless you were willing to embed for months in order to develop sources and develop relationships and get people to let their guards down.

Specifically, he explains that journalists are no longer allowed to interview any military personnel without a public affairs escort. 'They won't let you into the mess hall without an escort. It became really restrictive. As such, you stopped getting spontaneous responses to questions.' Several journalists in this study argue that such restrictions and lack of access to many newsworthy scenes are one factor in the declining embedded

coverage of the war. One newspaper reporter says: 'It's [a] pretty serious situation especially for photographers. In fact, a lot of them don't want to bother to be embedded because of that restriction.'

In general, the interviewed journalists all agreed that the war still provides important newsworthy stories, and that the American public should know what is happening in Iraq. What is beyond their control, they argue, is the decisions made by their news organizations to downsize the news operations in Baghdad. Irrevocable corporate decisions based on financial considerations directly affected the overall news coverage in Iraq. One television reporter seems to accept the realities of declining Iraq War coverage: 'The public is weary of war and we are weary of the cost to cover the war.'

Conclusion

In a departure from the numerous studies that focused on the performances of embedded journalists and the news coverage of the Iraq War during the escalation period of 2003–2007, this study offers a new, comparative contribution by examining journalists' assessments of embedded and unilateral reporting, as well as news selection in the escalation and de-escalation periods of the war, to provide a more comprehensive perspective of news gatekeeping during the entire period of the Iraq War between 2003 and 2010.

In general, studies found that the embedded journalists tend to perceive their experiences more positively (see Fahmy and Johnson, 2005; Ganey, 2004; Johnson and Fahmy, 2009; Kelley, 2003; Ricchiardi, 2003) than scholars and journalists who are often skeptical of the journalistic myopia it created (see Bennett et al., 2007; Brandenburg, 2007; Pfau et al., 2004, 2005; Tumber, 2004; Zeide, 2005). However, the war journalists interviewed in this study have more sophisticated and more balanced views toward embedded and unilateral reporting practices, suggesting that the two reporting methods should compensate for each other to present a more complete picture of the war. Their balanced perspectives are perhaps due to the seven-year time-lapse since the invasion in 2003, and the increasing inclusion of embedded and unilateral reporting in public discussion and within journalistic circles that presented both positive and negative reviews. Moreover, nearly half of the journalists in this study experienced both embedded and unilateral reporting, which may have provided them with more balanced perspectives and understanding about the two reporting practices. Given the situation where physical danger in the war zone is high during the escalation period, and when the shrinking news budget creeps upon journalists as a constraint during the de-escalation period, many journalists still consider embedding as an affordable and safer reporting tool compared to unilateral reporting.

The fact that war journalists in this study reported personal judgment as the most important force during the escalation period of the Iraq War implies that there is salient influence from individual-level gatekeeping, consistent with the finding in Fahmy and Johnson's (2005) study on embedded journalism during the 2003 invasion. However, other studies on war reporting confirmed the presence of significant gatekeeping forces from journalistic routine-level and organizational-level influences from news editors and group decisions (see Bailey and Lichty, 1972; Shin et al., 2005). The war journalists in

this study consistently argued that due to the fast-paced, contingent situations in the war zones they were allowed to remain highly independent and relatively free from editorial supervision or interference from their news organization in reporting the Iraq War stories. Further research will be helpful in determining whether these individual-level gatekeeping forces are consistently salient as documented in this study.

Important new findings in this study, as compared to other studies on the Iraq War, are the salience of organizational-level and social institutional-level gatekeeping forces in the de-escalation period of the Iraq War manifested in the form of declining news coverage during this period. As the war was protracted over several years with no prospect of a decisive victory, news editors and managers depended heavily on higher hierarchical levels of gatekeeping forces, such as deference to diminishing audience interest and consideration of financial constraints in determining their overall news coverage from Iraq, making the organizational-level and social institutional-level gatekeeping forces more salient.

The war journalists reported that the decisions to reduce the number of war correspondents or to shut down their Baghdad news bureaus were beyond their individual control, but affected their news coverage significantly. The shift in salience from individual-level gatekeeping forces to organizational/social institutional levels of gatekeeping forces as the Iraq War advanced from escalation to de-escalation sheds some light on how the decision-making power of the news gatherer-journalist is relinquished to news processors-editors, and to a larger extent media economics, as the war progressed and diminished. Much is at stake: the overreliance on embedded reporting due to the economic constraints and declining audience interest may lead to uncritical news reporting by war journalists who have little choice but to abide by the more restrictive embed rules.

The Iraq War is the third longest war in US history, after Vietnam and Afghanistan. The combat mission of the war ended in August 2010 with no victory or surrender ceremony. Following the withdrawal of all US combat troops, the remaining 50,000 US military troops left Iraq by December 2011 (Bacevich, 2011; Baker and Nordland, 2010). The Iraq War has become a forgotten conflict to American news audiences as the news organizations significantly curtailed their news coverage. As one journalist in this study aptly summarizes, the best covered aspect of the Iraq War has been the 'story of US troops' – 'about who they are, what they think, and how they're doing.' The most poorly covered aspect has been the 'story of the average Iraqi citizens and of stories that analyze a fractured society like Iraq.'

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