

# JustComment

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## On the home front: reporting the war on Iraq

**W**hat do we really know about the war on Iraq, and how much do newspaper and television reports influence our perspective? Is this war a confrontation between a 'righteous' George W. Bush and an 'evil' Saddam Hussein, who needs to be defeated? Or is it a more subtle confrontation involving regional players such as Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, interests such as oil and potential devastating consequences for innocent civilians? Will the Australian people support this war, and does their opinion matter?

### Framing the Conflict

A news report is like a window to the world. But like any window, it does have a frame that limits the view. Where will the journalists place their frame? What part of reality will enter the picture they present?

Both journalists and editors will inevitably be subjective in picking the criteria according to which this choice will be made. For corporate media, such criteria will be for example the concern about what story will 'sell.' Stories of violence are often perceived as popular, and will therefore tend to be widely reported, if not exaggerated in the hope of out-selling or out-rating competing news outlets. Journalists will also be tempted to simplify stories, in order not to bother the readers with details, and to capture the public's attention with catchy stories. *They will ask what, when, how, by whom, but they will rarely ask why.*

Journalists have a tremendous responsibility towards the public. As modern-day heralds, they spread the news and help form public opinion. In a democracy, their role impacts directly on the conduct of policy.

Because of this influence, journalists have to abide by a number of ethical guidelines in their work. The main rule they have to observe is the rule of 'objectivity,' that is, the clear distinction between what is 'news' and what is 'opinion.' While journalists are entitled to express their own opinions, they must clearly indicate this when they do so. Alternatively, news items should not include the journalist's opinion but only statements of facts.

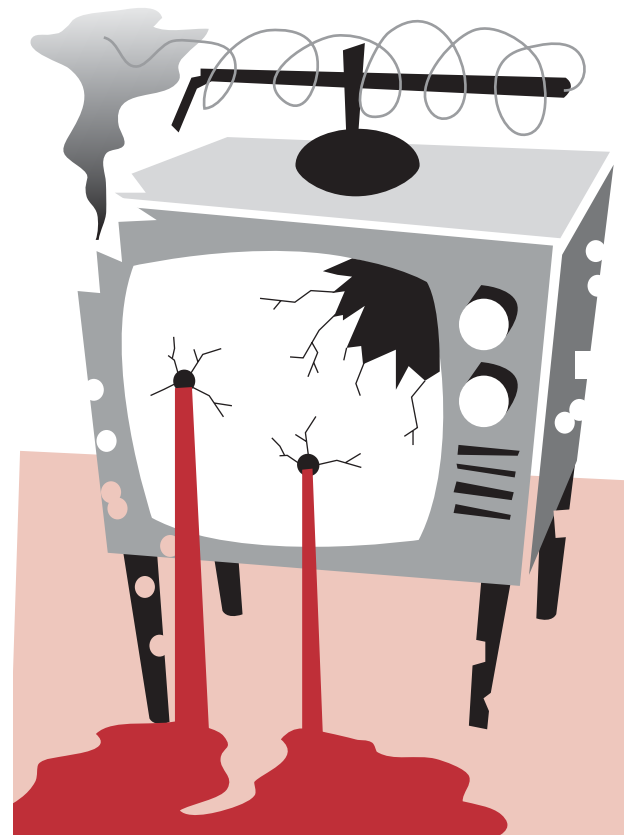
### Is objectivity possible?

Interestingly, the notion that 'facts' can be reported objectively is increasingly coming under attack from people who argue that there is no single, absolute truth waiting to be discovered and reported upon. Different reports can lead to very different interpretations of the same event. For a short news report, journalists will have to select facts to report and sources to consult. In doing so, they will 'frame' the conflict (*see box*).

### War journalism

Unfortunately, such choices can lead the reader to form an incomplete or distorted picture of the conflict. These are often the characteristics of what has been called 'war journalism':

- A focus on direct violence (shootings, riots, armed attacks) rather than on the structural processes that lead to the violence (economic exploitation, discrimination, social inequity);



- 'Peace' is therefore viewed as the absence of direct violence, but not necessarily the presence of justice ('positive peace');

- Conflicts are presented for the sake of simplification as bipolar confrontations. The only possible outcomes are total victory or total defeat, without possibility of mutual accommodation or win-win outcomes;

- An uncritical perspective of 'our' role in the story; - Heavy reliance on official sources, considered more 'objective' and newsworthy;

- People's initiatives for peace are often dismissed as irrelevant, in line with the view that only states and governments matter in international relations.

These characteristics have become particularly apparent in the coverage of the conflict in Iraq. The conflict is often portrayed as a confrontation between two leaders, George W. Bush and Saddam Hussein. This is curious since Iraq is also said to pose a threat to regional security, the security, in other words, of states like Iran and Saudi Arabia, but not directly the United States. Furthermore, the media acts as if the US and Iraq both speak with one voice, and does not leave space for dissenting voices such as the American peace movement or Iraqi civilians. In Australia, the peace movement did not receive any substantial coverage until half a million people demonstrated in the streets. The official position regarding Iraq continues to receive preferential treatment in the media and is regarded as 'Australia's position,' with minimal consideration for popular feelings.

Many in the peace movement would argue that the operation planned in Iraq is a foreign intervention of the most intrusive and violent kind, and therefore that its motives should be questioned. Many journalists do not challenge the motives of the US coalition, nor refer to the devastating impact on Iraqi civilians of previous 'interventions' in Iraq. This becomes especially clear when journalists report about positions or actions of the US and allied governments as 'we' and 'us,' rather than distancing the people from the leaders and the reporters from the reports.

### Who controls the flow of information?

Reports on Iraq rely heavily on official sources, ignoring alternative views. During the first Gulf war, in 1990-1991, the US army controlled the flow of information. Crucial information therefore did not find its way to our newspapers, such as the use of depleted uranium by allied forces, the devastating impact of the war on civilians, or the Gulf War syndrome affecting allied soldiers.

1. MANOFF, Rob. *Role Plays: potential media roles in conflict prevention and management*, Track Two, December 1998, p. 13

### Journalists do not just 'report the facts'

The way the conflict is framed will inevitably influence the reader's perception about its nature and about possible solutions. This influence becomes especially relevant once it is understood that readers are not just passive recipients of news, but are also shapers of future news. Furthermore, not only will the audience react to news reports but, in a media-savvy world, individuals will also increasingly use the media to trigger such reactions. Political leaders will try to receive favourable coverage in order to boost their popularity and gather popular support for their actions. They might try to influence the way stories will be reported, and they might even be tempted to fashion stories, to create facts to be reported in the hope of leading to a shift in public opinion or an international intervention.

What is the journalists' share of responsibility for the consequences of their reporting? German sociologist Max Weber distinguishes between an 'ethics of conviction' and an 'ethics of responsibility.' According to the latter, journalists must take into account the foreseeable consequences of their reporting. The ethics of conviction on the other hand posits that journalists have an absolute duty to tell the truth, regardless of the consequences. War journalism tends to regard this mission to reveal the truth as a sufficient condition for ethical reporting, although according to Weber both ethics are complementary rather than opposites.

### There is another way

Peace journalists acknowledge their responsibility for the consequences of their reporting, in accordance with the belief that *'the professional norms of journalism do not trump fundamental human moral obligations.'*<sup>1</sup> Certain tools lie at their disposal to attempt to minimise negative effects while fostering a positive and peaceful transformation of conflicts. Peace journalists will attempt to highlight underlying processes leading to conflict, such as patterns of exploitation or social

injustice. They will give a voice to the people to express a diversity of opinions, accept to report about non-official peace initiatives as relevant and newsworthy events, and criticise 'our' role in the story as much as 'theirs.' 'Peace' here is not merely understood as the absence of violence, but also the presence of justice, or 'positive' peace. A cease-fire agreement will therefore not necessarily be interpreted as the 'end of the conflict,' and conversely, a conflict will become newsworthy already before it erupts into a violent confrontation, in an attempt to force the relevant authorities to confront the issues and avert bloodshed.

### Just Action

If you are not happy about the way conflicts are reported by your newspaper/television/radio station, you should say so by writing a letter to the editor or to the particular journalist involved.

The British organisation Reporting the World ([www.reportingtheworld.org](http://www.reportingtheworld.org)) has developed a practical checklist for the ethical reporting of conflicts, which can act as a guide. The four main points are:

- How is the violence explained? Does the journalist question why it happened?
- Is the conflict reported as simply being between two sides, or are alternative voices reported?
- Are efforts or ideas to resolve the conflict peacefully addressed?
- What is 'our' role in the story? Does the story present us as the 'good guys' and someone else as the 'bad guys'?

Always remember to be polite – journalists will not respond if they feel insulted – and to show consideration for the conditions under which journalists have to operate (with very short deadlines). You may for example point at positive aspects of their reporting before voicing your criticism of other aspects. And the golden rule: BE PERSISTENT!



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