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Visual Communications

# **The Gulf War And Media Exploitation**

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## Introduction



"In war the truth is so important it must  
constantly be surrounded by a bodyguard of lies".  
Sir. Winston Churchill

More than five months after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait the air war had begun and a million troops were ready and waiting in Saudi Arabia to liberate Kuwait when the bombers' work of destroying the iraqis will to fight was done. The allies strategy for dealing with the iraqi army was put with memorable succinctness by General Colin Powell: "First we're going to cut it off, than we're going to kill it". The months of negotiation and United Nations diplomacy were suddenly and abruptly over. Muddling through with sanctions wasn't working fast enough. Every overture of peace had been rejected. So we were on our way to the new world order set out by President Bush with enthusiastic support from Margaret Thatcher and John Major as well as most of the house of Commons, where, as Roy Hattersley reported, MPs opposing war were shouted down. There was going to be no Munich in 1991.

The war proceeded in distinct phases. At first, everybody revelled in the heroic demeanour of the pilots - at their bravery as well as their frank confessions of fear. Then Saddam's scuds were launched on Israel and Saudi Arabia - and the west prayed that Israel would not respond. After the overkill of reporting in the newspapers and on television, a period followed when the story moved off the front pages, the soldiers waited and the airmen carried on their thousands of missions over Iraq. There was the foray at Khafji and then, the moment Saddam scored a propaganda coup and started worrying western public opinion, the bombing of the Baghdad bunker. The land war was over almost before the reporters could get their dispatches back.

After the war there were scores to be settled with the doubters; the discovery of the horrors of Saddam's torture chambers in Kuwait as well as the Kuwaitis' revenge on the palestinians; the first reports of the devastation wrought on the retreating Iraqi army at Mutla ridge; and then Saddam's revenge on the Kurds. The long



aftermath of the war still goes on - and the new world order seems even further away.

Yet that vivid report from CNN at midnight on january 16 was a singularly appropriate start for the first major war fought in the electronic global village created by satellite television news stations whose broadcasts are watched simultaneously throughout the world. Given the power of television, the military's power to censor was undoubtedly abused, whether by the allies whose briefings emphasised the deadly power of their bombing but not it's failure rate, and by Saddam to weaken the allies will to fight by emphasising civilian casualties and trying to push western opinion against the war. There was also a new attempt to offer a sanitised version of war without death.



**Chapter 1**  
**Selling a war**





But why, then, did America move so forcefully into a war situation? How did a nation, coming to grips with Vietnam, slip easily into a similar situation? Its inconceivable to think that America got involved because they morally thought Kuwait needed liberation. There were many reasons; some we will never learn about. But some are more obvious, like America's wish to have a 'power-base' in the Gulf, some way that they can get a say in what is going on. Then there is the American/Israeli connections. Israel has always had great sway in America, that is one of the reasons why Iraq was supported by the west in the Iran/Iraq war to stop Iranian aggression and domination in the Gulf, and therefore of Israel. So when Iraq invaded Kuwait, Israel naturally felt pressured and so strings started being pulled in the west. Another thing that helped America make up its mind is the way, over a six month period, Kuwait used one of America's biggest public relations firms to wage an unprecedented media campaign to urge the case for war. Many emotive compilations of images were put together by the public relations firm, Hill and Knowlton in August of 1990 and were issued, free of charge, to all the major American networks. It was an early stage in a multimillion dollar assignment to create an identity for Kuwait and build support for its cause. This high stage campaign began in earnest ten days after the Iraqi invasion when Hill and Knowlton were approached by a group of Kuwaitis who later became known as 'citizens for a Free Kuwait' The Kuwaitis first started by calling up as many friends as they could, many of those were involved either in public relations or had lived in America far longer than they had when they started to organise themselves. They discovered that anything they did would not be sufficient unless they lived or worked closely with a large public relations firm, so they went to Hill and Knowlton. As one of the biggest public relations firms in America, Hill and Knowlton are no strangers to working at the highest levels of international politics. Their client list includes the Governments of China, Turkey, and Indonesia. Chief executive Craig Fuller was a former Chief of Staff to Vice President Bush. Almost spontaneously as the Kuwaitis were talking to Hill and Knowlton, Hill and Knowlton were talking to the 'administration' to find out how they could be



helpful to the President's programme.

"They were delighted that Kuwait had reached out and was going to step up and provide the kind of support they were able to give, so there really was never any question. I think it was immediately felt that this would be helpful to the cause, and I think the White House itself was organising a communications strategy to communicate the policy, to communicate the importance of our presence in the region, and so this was able to play a small part in that overall communication effort" Craig Fuller, Hill and Knowlton .(8)

Of course in this day and age you must have public support, so the military learned from Vietnam, if you don't have public support, the resources for the military will erode as they did in Vietnam. So the Gulf War certainly must be supported by public opinion. This was perhaps the largest single assessment that Hill and Knowlton had had, with an enormous amount of activity happening over a short amount of time. The campaign faced an American public that was overwhelmingly opposed to the Iraqi occupation but sharply divided over the wisdom of military intervention. Hill and Knowlton's task was to influence opinions both at grass roots and at the highest levels of power. Making sure that the Kuwaiti message was heard in the UN Security Council and above all, in Washington itself.

"The whole purpose of this business is to influence public opinion, person by person, Congressman by Congressman, - millions by millions if that's the way the audience falls. You're trying to change opinion, or, if there is no opinion, develop one. Like, if there is no view of Kuwait, you try to create a positive image of Kuwait to serve some kind of end" George M. Warden, retired Vice President, Hill and Knowlton. (8)

The Wirthin Group (a research company) worked in partnership with Hill and Knowlton, monitoring public opinion and using their findings to develop the key campaign messages. Citizens for a Free Kuwait spent probably on Wirthin research alone just over a million dollars. For this they got Focus Group Research, daily tracking interviews in general world centres, monitoring of world opinion and monitoring of american public opinion. They did special studies





among High School children; they did studies on Capitol Hill members of staff, of key members in Congress; they did a lot of research to keep with, or give them the pulse of all aspects of Americans and to help target the messages to all those different audiences .

Some of the first images of occupied Kuwait were obtained and packaged by Hill and Knowlton and distributed by cassette and satellite to news media throughout the world. This is what is known as video news release And 'VNR's like these were an integral part of the campaign. Hill and Knowlton's head of video productions in Saudi Arabia was the former CBS and NBC news journalist, Lou Alison. To counter the impression that Kuwait resistance was weak, he helped arrange interviews with resistance fighters. He made sure that satellite feeds of conferences were available world wide. He also addressed the reputation of the Kuwaiti military. The problem was, that they didn't believe there was a Kuwaiti army, or if there was, where was it? After 8 or 9 days the Saudi s had it all set up, and took a bus load of American journalists to the Kuwaiti encampment and they spent forty-five minutes there. This wasn't enough for Lou Alison, so he went to the Kuwaiti Military and asked for some help. Then the journalists actually spent three days with the army, and three days with the Air force. This material was fed to Hill and Knowlton in Washington and was distributed as video news releases throughout America and to many networks throughout the world. A one and a half minute report from NBC's morning news programme was cut completely from footage supplied by Hill and Knowlton. A few days later the same footage turned up on the same network's evening programme. Hill and Knowlton produced some forty video news releases about Kuwait, many with pre-selected sound bites and useful 'B roll' shots for producers to add their own commentary. More than half of these VNRs were satellited to stations by 'Media Link', who normally handed rather less politically sensitive material. Kuwaiti videos, distributed by media link, accounted for two of the top ten VNRs of 1990.



"The story was fading away. Americans get to the point. The status quo becomes more and more acceptable. They forget about how awful things were that stirred them up in the first place. They have a very short memory and so part of our strategy began to be to redraw that line in the sand again and again, and to bring up the emotional feelings that they had, that caused such outrage earlier on in the crisis."  
Dee Allsop Vice President The Wirthlin Group (12)

Fifteen TV crews, a line feed to cable and distribution in VNR ensured that the Congressional conference of human rights reached a huge audience. The harrowing personal accounts brought home to millions the undoubted suffering of the Kuwaitis and the brutality of the Iraqi occupation.

It was the testimony of a young Kuwaiti girl, known only as Nayirah, who claimed to be a volunteer in the hospitals and to have witnessed the Iraqi army taking the incubators, that left the most indelible impression and in the weeks that followed, that story became the most frequently cited as an example of Iraqi brutality. In other accounts the scale of the atrocity was even greater. When Amnesty International included the story in their report on human rights abuses in occupied Kuwait, they gave the figure of 312 babies.

On November 22nd, two days before the U.N. Security Council vote which was to set the final deadline for Iraqi withdrawal the Kuwaitis gained almost unprecedented access for non-diplomats to present images and testimony to the Security Council. One of the highlights of the hearing was a screening of video footage supplied entirely by Hill and Knowlton.

When the Iraqis heard the story that they had stolen the incubators and killed babies in the process, they invited journalists into the Kuwaiti hospitals to see for themselves, but the story persisted until independent investigators arrived on the scene. Then the picture started to change. The doctor that gave Amnesty the information that





312 babies died, revised the number to 72. It finally settled at 30, 19 of which died before the Iraqis arrived. But what of Nayirah's story that as a volunteer in one of the hospitals she saw the story. The New York Times recently revealed that this key witness was one Nayirah Al Saba, daughter of the Kuwaiti Ambassador to the United States. Thomas Edson, Hill and Knowlton's president, described the article as an unjustified attack. "We had no reason", he said, "to question her veracity. (6)" Another unknown fact was how, at the time the witnesses appearing before the Congressional hearing were carefully coached by Hill and Knowlton. A representative said, "There was training with those individuals to help them get more comfortable with the circumstances, situations and questions, so they could focus on their story" (12). Not only were there questions about the validity of the stories, there was also a conflict of interest at the highest level of the Congressional hearing. At the time, Congressmen Porter and Lanters chaired the hearing on Kuwait. They also headed a private group, 'The Congressional Human Rights Foundation'. There are some disturbing links between this foundation and Hill and Knowlton. The Foundation literally operates out of the offices of Hill and Knowlton on the second floor of an office block called Washington Harbour in Georgetown. Hill and Knowlton provides an inkind contribution of over \$3,000 dollars for the Foundation, in the form of a rent reduction for the office space but the link doesn't end there. Frank Mancovich, Vice Chairman of Hill and Knowlton, became a director of the Foundation. The Foundation also received a sizeable donation of \$50,000 from Citizens for a Free Kuwait after Iraq invaded Kuwait.

Iraqi atrocities were a recurring theme in the congressional debates of January '91 which granted the President war powers. There was repeated references to the Amnesty International report and the incubator story was specifically cited several times - a story which was to prove totally unfounded as the Amnesty Investigators returned to Kuwait and found all the incubators to be still there, present and accounted for. Kuwaiti claims that these were new



incubators, installed after the war are somewhat ridiculous, considering that for weeks they had trouble getting food and water, never mind medical hardware. Doctor Mohamed Mathor directed Kuwait's primary health care system. His wife, Doctor Thieasa Yoseph ran the Obstetrics Unit at the maternity hospital. They fled to Kiro after the atrocity supposedly took place. When asked about it they said, "No, they didn't take them away from the incubators. To tell the truth, there was no service, no nurses to take care of the babies and that is why they died." What effect would these facts have had in the run up to the war? They would have seriously curtailed or at least slowed the pace with which things were progressing. But because of the virulence of media sensationalism all perspective was lost and Hill and Knowlton took over the show, putting what they wanted on the headlines and set the agenda with a ease that can't be healthy. With the outbreak of war Citizens for a free Kuwait closed their account with Hill and Knowlton



**Chapter 2**  
**The Good Fight**





Last Autumn the US Army Association held its annual get together, Inevitably the spirit of the occasion was victory in the Gulf, a one sided celebration of American power. Not only Military power, to dominate the enemy, but media power, to justify it.

It was not a cheap war. The Alliance share of the operational cost was met by America (\$60 Billion) Britain's contributions come to about 5% of the total (\$4.25 Billion). The balance was provided by France and other allies (\$.75 Billion) That comes to a total of \$70 Billion or \$1,150,000 for every minute of the fortytwo day war. But the real pay masters were rather different. Several countries led by the Saudis agreed to refund the fighters cost. The net result is that America, and in fact, Britain, ended up paying very little.

"Basically, for the United States, in the short term the war has come to zero financially. That is to say, what is cost us, we were reimbursed. There wasn't any heavy down sides. There weren't large casualties. None of the downsides, none of the expenditures expected to occur, actually happened. We took probably a tenth of the original casualty estimate, for example, so the costs both human and financially for the United States are very small." (2)

Indeed as Congress examines exactly how much of the sixty million was actually an extra cost, there are signs that America may even end up in profit. It was the Congressional Budget Office, which is an analytical arm of the Congress, which examined the costs of the war and has estimated that the increment may be as low as fortyfive to fifty billion dollars. This suggests that America will perhaps clear five billion dollars more than the actual incremental costs of the war. From the western point of view this was a clean war as well as a cheap one. There was a mission count. 109,876 missions flown. And there was a bombing count, over 100,000 Ibs of bombs dropped. But unlike Vietnam, this time there was and will be no





official body count of enemy dead.

From the Allies point of view, this was indeed a bloodless victory; very few people died, there was very little loss of equipment, but unfortunately this is only half of the picture. The fact is that inside Iraq the losses were horrendous. It is estimated, even by the pentagon that losses in the Iraqi army was around 150,000 people; and civilian losses could be about 200,000. If you consider the short amount of time, one month, that all those deaths occurred, they represent an incredibly high rate of loss. The overall effect of the bombing, analysts say, was to undo thirty years of development and bombed the Iraqis, as one aid chief put it, 'into a pre-industrial age'. Officially, civilians were not targeted, but as only seven percent of the bombs dropped were 'smart' and only seventyfive percent of the conventional bombs actually hit their intended target, that means that nearly 24,000 lbs of bombs hit targets other than those selected. People argue that the Iraqis had it coming to them. Does a peasant conscript have it coming to him, if he has no say as to who is running the country Iraq was run under a totally brutal system for years. You could not therefore argue that the ordinary people, especially the poor, with whom Bush said he had no quarrel, could be held responsible for the war.

In many cities in Iraq, raw sewage flooded into the street for months; fifteen million gallons per hour flowed into the Euphrates. Although the situation is improving, a hundred thousand children are expected to die as a result of the war. A study concerned with estimating the increase of mortality of children conducted a large household survey, which consisted of 9,000 households, and according to this survey, the mortality rate among children is at least twice the rate of earlier years and perhaps more than that. They are dying mostly of diseases that relate to basic depredation of food, water and sanitation. Diseases like gastroenteritis, typhoid and cholera are most common.



On top of that there are those who died in the abortive rebellions after the war, the Shiah in the south, and the Kurds in the north thought they had been encouraged to rebel by Bush and both were comprehensively crushed by Saddam as the allies looked on. Saddam is a villain, but overall the west suffers too. The war has antagonised a substantial body of arab opinion, antagonism towards the big american uncle that was seen to interfere in a regional inter-arab dispute. It is also the thousands and thousands of arabs that were killed by the americans and by the arab client states in this war. This is something that very many Saudis are bitterly unhappy about. It goes against the grain for them to be involved in a mass slaughter of so many of their arab brothers and sisters.

The Army Association jamboree in Washington is a showcase, as well as a celebration. Behind the stage they put on display for men and boys alike the army's latest tools. All of them up for sale to enthusiastic buyers. The arms salesmen are the second wave winners of the Gulf War. All that television coverage was a giant television commercial in disguise which is now paying off handsomely. For three years before 1990, sales of arms to the Third World had been falling steadily. Look at the orders since then; (2)

Bahrain	26 x MA3 Tanks 27 x M60 Main Battle Tanks 8 x Apache Helicopters
United Arab Emirates	20 x Apache Helicopters 620 x Hellfire Missiles Hydro 70 Rockets
Oman	119V-300 Commando Vehicles
Egypt	24 x Apache Helicopters 40 x M88 A1 Recovery Vehicles 24 x F-16 Fighters
Saudi Arabia	48 x Patriot Launchers 384 x Patriot Missiles 2300 x Jeeps 2486 x Trucks 2100 x Cluster Bombs





Saudi Arabia (cont.) 2,000 x Mk84 Bombs  
 770 x Sparrow Missiles  
 24 x F-15 Fighters  
 150 x M60-A3 MBT's  
 50 x Stinger Launch Tubes  
 200 x Stinger Missiles  
 150 x TOW Missiles  
 12 x Apache Helicopters  
 10,000 x Tactical Missiles  
 8 x Medicare Helicopters  
 150 x MIA2 MBT's  
 200 x Bradley Vehicles  
 200 x M113 ADC's  
 50 x M548 Cargo Carriers

In the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser extent, the United Arab Emirates, there is really an intention to build up really extensive military forces. The Saudis are on what one person described as an all time buying spree for new strike aircraft, interceptors, cluster bombs, multiple rocket launchers. All the really devastating weapons that were used in the Gulf War and the suspicion is that this will happen in Kuwait too. How this is going to add to Mr. Bush's 'new world order' will have to be seen, but adding petrol to a fire doesn't seem to be a good idea. A new arms race is not, I'm sure, what some Congressmen had in mind when they sanctioned the war.

Chance decreed that in the lead up to the war, the only arab country on the Security Council was Yemen. Among arabs, it was the first to condemn Saddam's invasion, but it didn't want Western powers making war in the Gulf. So, when it came to the crucial vote, Yemen said no. "That", said the American Ambassador to the U.N. "Was the most expensive vote you'll ever cast." And so it was. In three months, over 800,000 Yemenies were unceremoniously expelled from homes and jobs in neighbouring Saudi Arabia; some had lived there for over twenty years or more. Women were said to have been raped as they fled. Men tortured. The sick turned out of hospital beds. The exodus was virtually unreported/ unlike the incubator story.

"It is a war against people who have an opinion. They did not interfere, in the war, they occupied no land, but we are punished because we have opinions." (2)



Because the position of Yemen was misunderstood, you have the major western countries placing Yemen under a sort of a boycott, and the regional arab countries which used to be the benefactors of Yemen stopped their contributions or aid to Yemen. Yemen was the only country trying to change to a western style democracy in the Gulf, but now, because their economy is crippled, they can't.

Ever since the British invented Military censorship in 1856 (to crush criticism of the way it was running the Crimean War) wartime news management has had two main purposes: to deny information and comfort to the enemy and to create and maintain public support. In the Gulf War the new element has been an effort to change public perception of the nature of war itself. To convince us that new technology has removed a lot of the horrors of war.

From early on the emphasis has been on the 'surgical' nature of air strikes on military targets. The cancer would be removed, but the living flesh around it would be left untouched. 'Smart' bombs, dropped with 'pinpoint accuracy' would 'take out' only military installations; there would be little or no 'collateral damage' (dead civilians). Iraq's military machine would be destroyed from the air so that there would be no need of a ground war of attrition. The picture that this painted is of a war almost without death. A sanitised version of what has gone before. It was weeks after the bombing started before any bodies were shown on television, and then British T.V. chiefs voluntarily cut the more horrific scenes, no doubt in the interest of good taste.

Scud missiles being intercepted by Patriot missiles over Saudi Arabia and Israel brought an air of video games or fireworks display to the screen even though the debris from both missiles often caused more damage than the Scud on its own. A new language was brought into being to soften reality. Bombing military





targets in the heart of cities was 'denying the enemy of infrastructure' People were 'soft targets', Saturation bombing was 'laying down a carpet'. The idea was to suggest that hardly any people were involved in modern warfare, only machines. This explains the emphasis at press briefings on the damage 'our' machines had caused to 'Their' machines. Convinced that viewers and readers were interested, the media was happy to go along with this emphasis on technology. This list printed in the Guardian shows quite clearly how the media picked up on this softening reality.

**We have**  
Army, Navy and Air force  
Reporting guidelines  
Press briefings

**They have**  
A war machine  
Censorship  
Propaganda

**We**  
Take out  
Suppress  
Eliminate  
Neutralise  
Decapitate

**They**  
Destroy  
Destroy  
Kill  
Kill  
Kill

**We launch**  
First strikes  
Pre-emptive

**They launch**  
Sneak missile attacks  
Without provocation

**Our men are**  
Boys  
Lads

**Their men are**  
Troops  
Hordes

**Our boys are**  
Professional  
Lion hearts  
CAUTIOUS  
Confident  
Heroes  
Dare-devils  
Young knights of the skies  
Loyal  
Desert rats  
Resolute  
Brave

**Theirs are**  
Brainwashed  
Paper tigers  
Cowardly  
Desperate  
Cornered  
Cannon fodder  
Bastards of Baghdad  
Blindly obedient  
Mad dogs  
Ruthless  
Fanatical

**Our missiles are**  
Like Luke Skywalker zapping  
Darth Vader

**Their missiles are**  
Ageing duds



**Our missiles cause**  
Some collateral damage

**George Bush is**  
At peace with himself  
Resolute  
Statesman like  
Assured

**Our planes**  
Suffer a high rate of attrition  
Fail to return from missions

**Their missiles cause**  
Civilian casualties

**Saddam Hussein is**  
Demented  
Defiant  
An evil tyrant  
A crackpot monster

**Their planes**  
Are shot out of the sky  
Are zapped

All these expressions above have been used by the  
British Press in one week during the war.(1)



**Chapter 3**  
**The Media War**



Along with 'smart' bombs and Stealth fighters the Gulf War's technological marvels included advanced electronic graphics. Television, newspapers, and magazines scrambled to present information in an understandable and engaging manner, balancing the need to inform viewers while competing to attract them. The war might have been about a lot of things; the precious oil that fuels industrial societies; the liberation of a small nation overrun by its bigger more powerful neighbour; and patriotism, which intertwined with merchandising and marketing when manufacturers and retailers jumped on the band wagon.

The war was also about the ability of Governments and the mass media to shape and deliver the news. And it was about ghosts; the ghost of Munich, wherein Britain and France tried to appease Hitler by allowing him to annex half of Czechoslovakia; and the ghost of Vietnam, the decade-long war that bitterly divided America and ended in withdrawal after over 30,000 servicemen returned to the U.S. in body bags. In contrast to the steady erosion of public support during Vietnam, opinion polls taken a week after the Gulf air war began on January 16 1991, showed over 85% of Americans approving the action. Graphic symbols were rolled out to demonstrate solidarity and support. For Americans eager to display their patriotism, Old Glory was joined by the yellow ribbon. This symbol of longing for the return of loved ones had been popularised by the 1949 John Wayne cavalry movie 'She Wore a Yellow Ribbon' and the 1970's song 'Tie a Yellow Ribbon 'Round the Old Oak Tree', then was adopted during the 1980 Iranian hostage crisis as a graphic reminder to 'bring the hostages home'. When the massive deployment of troops into the Persian Gulf began, the yellow ribbon was quickly revived as a symbol of national unity and support for 'our soldiers in the desert'. Yellow ribbons sprouted by the hundreds of thousands from mailboxes and lapels, creating a temporary national shortage of this patriotic commodity.

The Gulf war belonged to television and the





technological advances since Vietnam meant, for the first time, live broadcasts from the theatre of war that enabled a global audience to become participants. Instant celebrities were created, not on the battle field, but on the television screen. General Schwarzkopf showed videos of 'smart' bombs blasting their targets with Nintendo precision, not mentioning that 80% of the bombs were the old stupid type, free-falling towards their targets. The impact of dinner-time combat footage during the Vietnam war was not lost on the Defence Department, which drastically restricted press coverage from the battle zone, putting pressure upon graphics to convey information and fill time. Broadcast news graphics departments at all the networks found themselves under siege, working in around-the-clock combat conditions to keep pace with rapidly changing events. Maps, battle field models, and information graphics on weapons systems helped news anchors and experts explain the war to viewers. Military terms and weapons systems mentioned in the constant briefings had to be explained with graphics.

Each of the five major American networks devised an identity for its war coverage; thus while the Olympics for example would have one logo and animated introduction (called a bumper in broadcast graphics), the Gulf War as a television special event went on air with five different identifiers.

After Iraq invaded Kuwait on August 2 1990, a period of uncertainty and sanctions was followed by a growing realisation that a shooting war was likely. During late 1990 all of america's five networks graphics departments began to prepare. ABC's managing director of broad cast graphics recalls:

"We did something unusual; we did a little thinking. We knew the military would restrict our efforts to get news, which meant there would be very little videos, and graphics would come to the fore". (11)

Immediately after the invasion ABC News began a



full time effort building a library of graphic materials - maps, weapons systems, statistical charts - and by the time intensive coverage began with the launching of the air war on January 16 , a resource base of over 1,500 graphics was available. Fifty copies of a loose-leaf notebook displaying these graphics with their code numbers were prepared so every ABC News show could request maps, etc. as needed. Each day, the graphics department distributed 25 copies of a full-colour update, showing new graphics created during the past 24 hours. Eric Shapiro, producer/ director of CBS News Special Events, states that CBS's planning began in earnest when the title 'Showdown in the Gulf' was coined in early December 1990, just as the possibility of war became an increasing certainty. "The designs we settled on was the overall feel of a war room situation room environment, with dozens of monitors and green phosphorescent grids having the appearance of radarscopes'. Thus giving the impression of a 'centre of information' somewhere in direct contact with the 'front'. CBS also began to build a library of graphics in December and early January.

CBS also created a battlefield built to a model railroads HO scale. Designed with guidance from military experts, it was filled with bunkers, and barriers and military equipment. By photography simulated battles on this model battlefield using 35mm motion picture film in a snorkel camera controlled by a motion-control computer, CBS was able to 'explain' the military manoeuvres occurring in front lines that were off-limits to the press, producing a very entertaining and bloodless battle .

By the end of the first week it became clear who the real winner would be. As Mark Lawson pointed out in his TV column in the Independent on Sunday "It is now widely believed that if Saddam Hussein does surrender, he will surrender to CNN". Although Saddam may not have finally thrown in the towel to Peter Arnett, by the end of the conflict, it was reported that CNN had triumphed in a basic struggle. Record viewing figures during the early stages of the crisis last year helped CNN's parent company Turner Broadcasting to





turn a profit for the first time in five years. After losing \$70.7 million in 1989, the company managed to make \$4.6 million in 1990. Despite huge audiences, the profits were kept down by the extra costs of covering the war. CNN remain unwilling to release exact figures in how much they spent, but estimates put the figure at \$15 million over the budget planned for its Gulf coverage. Still, all that cash meant that with the onset of the air war, CNN were in place to catch the action as it unfolded. As a result, CNN's coverage started to make the news itself. In the run up to the war, as politicians delivered messages to each other via CNN, it became clear that the network had become a channel for accelerated communication between the various politicians trying to reach a diplomatic solution. When the fighting started, CNN became the War Channel. It was where the war was happening 24 hours a day. Its journalists became the most memorable faces of the war. Bernard Shaw, one of those who reported live on the first air strike on Baghdad, was interviewed on prime time network news in America. Peter Arnett's broadcasts from Baghdad became the subject of political debate and condemnation from rabid right-wingers. Admitting defeat, other networks either ran reports about CNN or ran its coverage when they couldn't get their own. Ted Turner and the news network he started in 1980 had a good war. He probably thinks that all the extra expense was money well spent - a good business investment.

For all the talk of moral principles and just causes, the cynical truth is that war is good for business. One financial analyst interviewed early on in the conflict on the BBC pointed out that because of the gains made in controlling the supply and price of oil, the war would effectively pay for itself. During the first weeks of the air war, western construction companies were already starting to hustle for lucrative rebuilding contracts for Kuwait city and Baghdad. After suffering a severe peace scare with the end of the cold war, the arms trade was beginning to see a possible profit in President Bush's new world order. Another beneficiary of the Gulf conflict was the global TV news trade. TV news thrives on crisis, and the war gave



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CNN a platform to show how exciting and compelling 24 hour real time news could be. In the process they revealed a market for worldwide line news and 'rolling' news (extended broadcasts that continue as long as there's incoming news to keep them going) which other organisations are now attempting to tap.

For example, Sky News on the late Rupert Murdoch's BSkyB network. Before the Gulf crisis, Sky News had something of an image problem. Although its difficult to apply the distinctions between print journalism to TV news, the critical consensus was that the BBC's Nine O'Clock News, Newsnight and C4 News were the equivalent of quality broadsheets like The Independent or The Guardian. The ITN's News at Ten corresponded to something like the Mail or the Express, whilst Sky News was down there with the Sun. With the war, things changed. George Russell, the Chairman of the Independent Television Commission, wrote to BSkyB's chairman, Ian Irvine, to say how impressed he was with Sky News Gulf broadcasts.

For the Gulf, Sky spent heavily to improve the quality of their coverage. Although they usually rely on agency-shot footage of foreign events, they sent their own journalists out to the Gulf. since then, they have tried to make much of the quality of their war coverage. A sheaf of press releases celebrates Sky News 'various triumphs' in the news war. With the BBC and ITN pinned down by standard schedules, the network was the first British channel to broadcast news of the start of the air war; the next morning Sky News beat the other networks by all of a minute when it came to broadcasting John Major's first statement on the start of hostilities.

Further releases point out that 25 million homes in Europe are now taking Sky News programming and that broadcasters from Japan, Australia, Israel, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Turkey, Spain and France have all requested the networks Gulf coverage. In interviews, Sky News' head, John O'Loan, even argued that because the network wouldn't recoup all the money sunk into it for years it



was "a very serious public service commitment". It seems fairly obvious that the war was the perfect business opportunity for Sky News. A chance for them to pump up the ratings, answer critics and earn brownie points for Rupert Murdoch's beleaguered satellite network.

John O'Loan doesn't see it quite like that. "Every story that comes along is an opportunity for us to show what we can do it just so happens that the Gulf is biggest story we've had in the last six months. But then again, we've handled the Gulf as well as we've handled Eastern Europe, the Putney train crash, the marchioness disaster I think we've been doing very good coverage on the Gulf, as evidenced by the fact we've been first to break so many of the big stories."  
(7)

Being first is the measure Sky uses to gauge its success. But is simply being first the most important thing about TV news? "One of the essences of the news is to be quick with it, and if you're quicker than anyone else, which we have been, its got to show you're doing a good job", comments O'Loan. Still, this seems a rather literal interpretation of what news means. There are arguments that on their rolling real time broadcasts, CNN and Sky play up the eyewitness atmospherics, that they simplify complex events, that they don't offer enough hard information, that they don't properly analyse or explain. It could be argued that real time rolling broadcast is the logical end point for all TV news. TV's dominant tense is the present, and TV news really prefers the exhilaration of breathless reports on what's happening now, to difficult retrospective explanations of what happened. However, in the past, technological incapacity and programming schedules imposed delays and a chance to ruminate on events. Now networks have become prisoners of their own improved technology. The ability to broadcast events as they happen round the world has shrunk the space for critical reflection. Even if they wanted to analyse events in detail, they don't have the time there's always another live linkup to be made with a journalist on the ground, something which is probably more of a ratings draw than a studio-based group of talking heads trying to make sense of events.





O'Loan disagrees. "The technology does pose an additional challenge. What used to happen was that the journalist would get the information before everybody else, have time to stand back and think, then go in and tell the audience what to think. That doesn't happen now. The audience has the information at the same time as the journalist. So now, when the analysts come along, after doing some thinking, the audience has had a chance to do that too. On the whole, I do think we do give depth and analysis to the news as it unfolds. We don't go into as much depth as 'Newsnight' because if we did, we wouldn't be providing our primary service, which is breaking news as it happens. We're a news channel first and a current affairs channel second. Our first concern is immediacy." (7)

Perhaps this was why Sky News introduced a special Gulf phone-in-service, so its audience could feel really involved. For two hours each week, viewers could phone in and quiz Sky journalists in various locations about the war. On the face of it, it seems like a ratings-boosting gimmick, the kind of thing you expect to see filling out normal daytime TV schedules. O'Loan argues that it was a sign of the channel's respect for its audience. "Not every journalist is going to be smart enough to ask all the questions the audience wants to know about. Its a very valuable service, and allowing members of the audience to put their own views forward could never be a gimmick".

Not everyone shares the belief that 24 hour real time news really serves the viewers interests. In the early days of the war, it became apparent that CNN in particular was functioning as a potentially dangerous rumour mill, a channel for global panic attacks. The best example was provided by its reports on the first Scud attack as Israel was retaliating. Although the reports were inaccurate, the possibility that the network might have dangerously forced the pace of events became clear. In general there has been criticism that the 24 hour channels overwhelm their viewers with eyewitness drama and that in the process they lost sight of their real responsibility to inform the public. Gary Mitchell of ITN sees achieving a balance between breaking the news with analysis as vital. "What I think ITN's job is, is





to get information out quickly, but in a way that adds to the viewers understanding". Mitchell has reservations about some of the ways CNN and Sky fill their airtime, for example their habit of running 'raw' unedited videotape, usually amateur, of events as soon as possible. "Its just a personal view, but I don't think we should expose viewers to that. Its our responsibility to look at it and decide why its important. If we don't do that, what service are we providing the viewer?"

Mitchell goes on to point out that despite all the praise CNN received for its war coverage, it did receive some criticism. "There was all this stuff just being pushed at people, and they weren't really able to digest it. Its like a huge meal with lots of courses and not knowing where to start because its all on the table at once. What you really want is for someone to serve you a starter, then the main course etc."(7)

However, one of the main problems with the Gulf war was that, whilst there was a glut of coverage, because of military control and censorship, there was very little hard information for viewers to get their teeth into. Combine this with the apparent belief that in a post-CNN world, only extended rolling news programmes could adequately register the seriousness of events and you were faced with the absurd spectacle of the BBC's 'rolling gossip' extravaganzas, in which David Dimbleby struggles heroically to turn his meagre ration of new information, the latest unhelpful military briefing, a discussion between two retired colonels and anyone who'd ever taught Arabic Studies at university and footage which had been shown several times already into a serious news broadcast. As several TV critics pointed out, much TV news during the Gulf crisis was turned into thinly disguised series of commercials for the military. With real information thin on the ground, what happened with Gulf coverage was that the process of getting the news became the news. TV became trapped in a self-reverential spiral. It reported on its own coverage, it became obsessed with whether it was reading events right. With the most dramatic film from the war - the videos of 'smart' missiles



finding their targets - being essentially impersonal, journalists became the only visible heroes as they donned gas masks and continued broadcasting despite air raid warnings. Whether they actually had anything worth transmitting aside from the immediate impression of danger was open to question. Take the BBC's John Simpson and his celebrated broadcast from Baghdad in which the excited viewer could hear him pulling a fast one on Iraq police convincing them that he was merely testing his satellite transmission equipment. It was undoubtedly brave, but was it brave to any purpose? Did Simpson have the time to communicate anything other than the risk he was taking?

In a way it could be argued that the Gulf War merely revealed, in a more exaggerated form, the limitations of TV news in general. TV news has image problems. It has to show rather than tell, hence the pointless visual drama and authenticity of having journalists report on location (outside the White House or inside an airbase in Ryad) when the information could just as easily have been delivered in the studio. Hence also the increasing barrage of graphics and computer animations mobilised to help explain and spice up the news. Its often been argued that TV remakes the world to suit the medium; that cameras aren't innocent recorders so much as agents of provocation; that TV either conjures up the news or merely reports on its own intrepidity in getting a story. Gulf coverage provided numerous examples of all this, from Peter Snow's sand table war games with toy tanks and graphics displays which turned death and destruction into a sanitised drama of colour-coded arrows, to best of all, CNN's report at the first Scud attack on Israel which featured the network's anchor quizzing a reporter from another network, also gas-masked, about what was going on, before turning to Israel TV to see if that would be of any help. For all their concern to present hard facts as fast as possible, it seems that the 24 hour are destined to be vehicles for data. In the last decade, increasing concern was voiced, particularly in America, that pressure to keep up ratings was adversely affecting news values. Networks turned their anchors into celebrities, broadcast





the news from different locations, ran more 'human interest' features, and sensationalised stories, failed to cover difficult depressing news like the savings and loans crisis, began to dramatically re-stage certain stories, even in one famous case, running manufactured footage of supposed actions in the war in Afganistan. CNN and Sky may not have resorted to anything so crass, but its clear they rely on a certain theatre to keep their ratings high. The end of the war left you wondering how they would manage to fill all the available air time now, and how would they keep people watching.

It seems more likely that in future they will have more competition. Both BBC and ITN are expanding their attempts to sell news programmes to a global market. The BBC is pushing ahead with plans for its own global satellite service, BBC World Service Television which aims to be the equivalent of the Radio World Service News. ITN already supplies its World News programme to TV networks around the world, and in the aftermath of the Gulf War hopes to be able to attract more customers. Whilst 24 hour channels rely on the drama of real live events to attract more customers, the likes of ITN and BBC will rely on more traditional virtues to see their wares.





## Conclusion



One year after Desert Storm, Saddam Hussein still rules a devastated land. The Kuwait's royal family is back on its throne with its own human-rights abuses a daily unreported routine. Perhaps now, as public ardour cools and the yellow ribbons yellow, journalists can confront their own complicity in selling this war in the guise of reporting it. It is time to admit that major media institutions became willing collaborators of an orchestrated government policy. R.W. Apple of the New York Times is livid at the way the Pentagon pool system deliberately interfered with the free flow of information. At a recent forum, he called the military minders incompetent, and accused the government of curtailing freedom of the press. Jonathon Alter of NewsWeek went so far as to call on his colleagues to risk jail and violate military restrictions the next time that journalists are corralled into pools. CNN's Bernard Shaw acknowledged to a university conference that the American people 'never got the whole story'.

This scepticism found more adherents because of how the war turned out with what the UN has called apocalyptic damage in Iraq, a country that suffered as many as 200,000 military fatalities, many inflicted as their troops fled Kuwait at the US' request, only to be wiped out in what an Air Force pilot called a 'turkey shoot' with Hussein's massacre of Kurds and the Shi'ite Muslims; and nearly five million people displaced across the region. The television news coverage of the war never showed us the scale of the suffering or prepared us for the cycle of upheavals, reprisals and arms sales to follow. Instead it substituted images for information. Some journalists later said that the power of the mighty Iraqi army had been deliberately misrepresented and exaggerated; that only a minority of the munitions used were so called 'smart' weapons; that the allies may have been as responsible for the oil spills in the Gulf as Iraq; that the Patriots caused more damage than the Scuds; that there may have been no basis for the chemical weapons scare; that the real cost of the war could end up being ten times the official estimate once you factor in



veteran's benefits and war debt.

The packaging of this coverage - with its cast of military experts, nose cone footage, and absence of critical analysis - is the product of a television system that itself is rarely covered. To get at how TV News gets at us, you have to put Television itself into the kind of context that it rarely puts the issues it is covering. And unfortunately, the people who can do that best - the professionals who sit in at the network's morning meetings that decide the story lineups, who decide which images to send our way, and who know what parts of their scripts get approved and what they have to cut out for reasons of time and content are part of the news system themselves. Its hard to be objective when you are caught up in the day-to-day, especially during those periods of crisis such as round-the-clock gulf coverage when the adrenaline rush has a contagious quality .

Corporate cultures exist within news organisations the way they do in other organisations - with unwritten rules steering one toward being part of the team. TV news organisations are structured into hierarchies and governed by codes of conduct that tend toward a sameness of approach, even a homogenisation of what programmes call 'product'. The TV has its own imperatives, turning the news world into its own world with its own language, grammar, ideology and interests. What is and isn't covered often has as much to do with how a programme is seeking to position itself before the perceived or real demographics of a programme's audience as the actual importance of any one story.

A University of Massachusetts survey research team probed ordinary Americans for the basis of their jingoism and concluded that (a) most people actually know very little about the issues on which they had strong opinions; (b) they tended to echo government policy justifications, and (c) the more TV news they watched, the less they actually knew. That's because news and truth were frequently worlds apart. The behind-the-scenes story of the





politics and economics that created Hussein's power - including the role of the United States - was rarely told. In fact, a poll showed that 73% of the American people said they didn't know the US was arming Hussein during the ten-year Iran-Iraq war. No wonder then the events that led to the war, and their context, were barely explained. American television news demands immediacy, brevity, and most pathetic of all, 'Sound-Bites' - words that are both tasty and meaningless, a five second substitute for human thought, the journalists equivalent of junk food a diet which leads to a condition of information overload. Something from which the world audience suffered during the war. Information overload occurs when the victims need for information results in the consumption of raw data (information that has no relevance or real meaning) which in turn results in a state of saturation where no new information can be absorbed or stored.

The Reagan and Bush administrations knew something that Franklin Roosevelt understood; Americans get mad at bad guys, not bad ideology. Find a Hitler, or invent one, and you have the battle half won. So Ghaddafi begat Noriega, and Noriega begat Hussein Demonisation was rediscovered as a key tool of psychological mobilization. And to complete the circle, in this sales scenario, George 'Wimp' Bush played Rambo, 'a man not to be crossed'.

"the urgent, imperative need to redefine our role,'to break free of the almost exclusive task we inherited from the newspapers of the 20s and 30s of recording news events to embark on a new tradition of journalism"

Robert Fisk. (3)

This quote is from an article about the need to change the way newspaper journalists report the news, the need to get away from front page or scoop journalism to a grander form of analytical reporting. He states how important print journalism still is

"Print journalism has probably never been so important to the functioning of democracy as it is in the age of satellite television. For, however powerful and all seeing a



camera may appear to be,- however live a press-conference it is effectively superintended-piloted- by government authorities". ibid (3)

The inquest into the coverage of the Gulf is more likely to produce a clash between the various sections of the media than between the media and the Defence Departments, as was the case after Falklands campaign. The speed of victory and the fact that it was relatively painless - for the allies - look like burying the fact that the management of the news was not only as effective as in the Falklands but in some ways, more effective. How did the military pull it off? The pool system was an enormous help. It tends to produce the lowest common denominator reporter. One acceptable to every client of the pool. This rules out the independent-minded, maverick, correspondent in favour of the reliable, harmless one. The old sense of identification with the subject worked as it always does. At first TV chiefs were determined to rotate their reporters so that they would not have time to become too involved with the troops. But when the time came to do this, the British military commanders begged that the original reporters be allowed to stay on and they were. Some even began to wear military clothing, contrary to MoD guidelines.

The military was careful to keep out the better breed of stills photographer because unlike TV cameras, they do not always need action and can linger on some of the horrors of war. So photographers like Donald McCauley, were kept hanging around waiting for visas.

Trying to make television see its responsibilities in relation to truth and its audience when broadcasting will be very difficult as long as it has to compete to get an audience. Its responsibilities to the ratings and the profits will outweigh its responsibilities to the audience. What is needed is a change in the education system, not a change in the way television is broadcast which would be difficult and against the nature of television and



democracy. Television relies on its audience. So a more thinking, educated audience would demand a higher level of standards from its media. But at the moment there is no primary level and very little post primary level education of media, considering the amount of time children and adults spend watching television compared to the amount of time they spend reading. This is an extreme case of shortsightedness by education authorities. In today's world it is as important to be media literate as to be print literate, if not more so. It is time people started to look ahead and not behind. Children are being educated for a world that no longer exists which leaves audiences exposed to media exploitation and vulnerable to manipulation.





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