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The Reconstruction of Reality in Theaters of Operations by War Correspondents

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Abstract*:* There are many studies in specialized literature that refer to media effects, how the press influences public opinion, how journalists choose to frame a particular topic, sometimes intentionally, in order to achieve an immediate effect, other times because it is fashionable, for the sake of rating, or following firm orders received from the newsroom. However, in crisis situations, the way information is accomplished, the accuracy of information, its subjectivity or the shallowness of the articles can have serious consequences and can directly influence the course of military operations. The purpose of this approach is far from throwing this risky, attractive, complicated journalistic genre into ridicule, but rather to try to understand some of the mechanisms underlying the construction of reality in the media and to invite readers to be more careful when consuming media products other than as a mere entertainment. Therefore, in this article we will explore what is and how the reconstruction of reality in theaters of operations through war correspondents occurs under the impact of the phenomenon of searching for the sensational on the battlefield.

Keywords*:* reality; fake-news; framing; sensational; media manipulation

1. Introduction

In the 20 years I have spent in the military media, I have been constantly in touch with the theaters of operations where the Romanian Army sent troops, whether it was Bosnia, Kosovo, Albania, Iraq, Libya or Afghanistan. I knew, therefore, the "reality" of the battlefield, initially through the experience of other journalists who

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reported from there, civilians or military, of the stories they generously offered, then directly, during missions.

When I was sent to report from such areas I realized that the story most people put on in an attractive, journalistic outfit is sometimes their own perspective, that the facts are sometimes accelerated, exaggerated so as to create certain emotions, states, attitudes and finally a sometimes-distorted perspective on reality. In fact, the limited broadcasting space in which journalists have to fit does not allow for the procrastination of things or the presentation, for example, of a day when nothing happens, because there are, of course, moments of calm.

2. The Media, Looking for the Sensational on the Battlefield

The public interest and appetite for war-inspired cultural products created world records. The movie Rambo is just one example of such success, from a whole series of media, film, music, literary productions, etc., in that it has been presented in a record number of theaters since its appearance, 2074, being listed as the third in the world according to the number of tickets sold at the time. Soon, the film would be in first place in terms of revenues. There was even a fashion of Rambo-style haircuts, T-shirts, keychains, knives and other symbols that represented the war hero. "This year, stores are stocking up on combat accessories: a reproduction of Rambo's high-tech bow, Rambo knives and a wide range of toy rifles, including an automatic weapon that sprays water at a distance of 30 of meters" (Kellner, 2001, p. 86). The US military printed posters with the hero's face used in recruitment campaigns. Rambo-type vitamins would also appear.

Moreover, became a favorite topic of the press. "Fear and hatred, the feeling of security as well as political mobilization depend on the way reality is perceived. Technological development, as well as the evolution of the information environment, have led to changes in the role of the media in the presentation of wars, in shaping a certain way of perceiving reality" (Seethaler et. al., 2013, p. X). So how could the press stay away from war or not play an important role in how society perceives war?

The public's perception of the war is influenced by the media, but especially by the way the new media relates to the conflict. The information and its impact on the public are influenced by several external factors, including the way the message is conveyed. For example, the impact of news in newspapers differs from that of television, which broadcasts live from the battlefield, or the content created by

amateurs on YouTube. And the differences are not only in the way these materials are produced, but also in the public's access to them. Certainly, technological changes in the new media influence the way journalism is conducted, the role of professional communication but also the way in which media messages are perceived by the public.

After the "television war", the role of media in conflict seems not only very important in terms of people's perception of the actions of the battlefield, but also in the success of the war in audiences or even troops in missions. Vietnam would lead to a unification of mass culture and a so-called culture of war, which would greatly influence cinema and music, aspects that would contribute to the myth that the United States did not lose on the battlefield but rather at home, in front of the TV. The media was seen as strong, persuasive and difficult to manipulate with traditional propaganda.

With the Vietnam War and the involvement of media culture in this conflict, the way in which the public views the war changed. Not only for soldiers or their families, but also for the general public is difficult to accept that they are dying in a war that has a cause which is not fully understood and unanimously accepted. The way the Vietnam War is presented to public opinion through personal approaches, by describing the feelings of enlisted journalists, which approach subjectively, emotionally, leads to an end of propaganda, which gives way to public relations. There is a revolution in the way military operations are promoted, emphasizing public relations and the effort that this time is no longer a justification for war, but the idea of inducing the image of a just war.

In terms of media, Vietnam means a paradigm shift. Television and photojournalism have shaped the war, bringing unimaginable things to the people. The famous photo, with the Vietnamese girl running naked on the street after suffering severe burns on her back, following a napalm attack, taken by Nick Út, a Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer, is the best example when it comes to the force the media have in defining reality. Therefore, the idea of uninterrupted media coverage, especially during armed conflicts around the globe, sheds even more light on the importance of the audiovisual on the battlefield. The concept of "embedded journalism" appears, enlisted journalists, who accompany the troops everywhere and broadcast for a so-called "Pentagon TV". What until then was clearly in the sphere of propaganda migrates towards a professionalization of the army in the media field. So, we are no longer talking about a control of information, but rather a kind of marketing, we are not talking about lies, but rather omissions of the whole truth, there is no more

censorship from the outside, but rather a kind of self-censorship, which raises worrying questions about the future of journalism in this space of conflict, in a democratic society. "After Vietnam, the media in general and the new media in particular are becoming part of the military strategy." (Seethaler et al., 2013, pp. X - XII).

A constraint of today's media, even if it may seem paradoxical, is technological. According to Wolton, although the development of technology comes with many facilities for transmitting information from anywhere in the world, cheap and in real time, eliminating virtually any delay between the occurrence of the event and the time of its transmission, this dream of live transmission, as the author expresses himself, takes the shape of a nightmare. Nightmare caused by the impossibility of analyzing the event, the causes of its occurrence, understanding the context and only then transmitting it to the public.

All this possibility of analysis eliminated leads to a subjective framing of the event, depending on the perception of the reporter, who cuts a piece of reality and transmits it as it comes at hand, just for his sake now and here. And even if the reporter is an experienced one who manages to follow the event in a coherent way, Wolton has great doubts when it comes to public perception, which he does not consider sufficiently trained, skilled and critical in interpreting what is seen on-screen. "The easier it is, technically, to produce information, the harder it is on the one hand to select and process and on the other to perceive." (Wolton, 2012, p. 271).

Therefore, technical constraints are rather intended to break the classical flow of information, to lead to a more superficial information, sometimes governed by economic interests, to which speed is added, the haste to transmit everything live, immediately, without careful analysis of the event. Thus, we often see predictions about the causes of an explosion, a plane crash or even a military intervention offered on the spot by the reporter, who no longer has the patience or the mission to wait for the opinion of the teams of experts who are on the scene to investigate, sometimes for quite long periods, the causes of an event.

This type of live transmission, immediate and often superficial in terms of the interpretation of information, is no exception when it comes to modern conflicts. From this point of view specialists consider that the Gulf War can be considered the first "live" war in which the emotional participation of the public through the media was massively involved. The media is beginning to have an increasingly subjective involvement in transmitting reality and creating it at the same time. More than ever,

the goal and strategy of this new type of involvement of new media in conflict is to create a subjective perception of reality. Not only do governments need adequate presentation and image, but journalists themselves, through their narcissistic side, are beginning to be increasingly concerned with standing out during the conflict. In fact, on Mass Media Day, in Romania, most journalists who posted photos with themselves on social networks preferred those taken in a theater of operations, even if it was not the defining factor of their career.

3. Encoding / Decoding as a Model of Reality Reconstruction

When these new types of asymmetric wars begin or end, the good and bad sides involved in the conflict, the soldiers fighting for good and the terrorists are publicly defined, globally, by the media who decide "whether the war on terror was a success or failure (...) whether the resolution of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was right or not, whether the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were victories or defeats, but, even more complicated, for whom."(Seethaler et al., 2013). If we discuss the issue of asymmetry between equipment, technology, causes, firepower, etc. between the belligerent camps, why not analyze the asymmetry between the way the conflict is publicly presented and the way the message is decoded, received by the public.

The news that now circulates instantly across the globe has immediate effects and sometimes forms the reactions of decision makers, especially when it comes to large-scale disasters, armed conflicts, refugee crises, etc. "Since the Vietnam War, commanders have faced a new challenge: fighting in the presence of TV cameras. Subsequently, during the Iraq war the US armed forces even experienced the integration of journalists in military units" (Mocanu, 2018, p. 110).

Analyzing the contribution of the media to the conduct of military operations in the case of the war in Afghanistan, the Taliban closely monitored how the media transmitted the conflict, which made the importance of strategic communication among troops reach an all-time high, becoming more important than tactical results. That is why the commanders, but also the journalists, had to renegotiate the territories, to reach certain agreements that would satisfy both the public's need for information, but at the same time not to endanger their own troops and the success of military operations. General Herbert Norman Schwarzkopf, concerned both with the image of the army and with the maintenance of military secrecy, established some important rules that the military had to follow in its relations with journalists. Thus, the military personnel were not supposed to be intimidated in any way by the

press, journalists, nor to answer all questions, or even answer any question, if there were suspicions that the answer could help the enemy and finally never lie to the American public. "On the other hand, the professionalism of journalists determines the elaboration of their own variant of reality, built according to commercial principles or according to a political agenda that vitiates the much-desired impartiality" (Mocanu, 2018, p. 111).

The reality is that the raw presentation of suffering in certain regions can lead governments to act, stand aside or even lose public support for potential military intervention. Also, in the global village, as Marshall McLuhan prophetically called this interconnected world, the war takes place in a well-defined geographical space, but also live, on various social networks, televisions, etc. and the fights are no longer going on in the conventional way. The means and forces of the sides involved in the action are disproportionate. Also, the causes for which they fight are different for each of the parties involved. We are speaking, therefore, about an asymmetrical, atypical conflict, characterized rather by short, treacherous clashes to which, later, the media gives a certain perspective, framing them according to the way they appreciate the justice of the cause of the conflict. As Seethaler (2013) argues, the time of war becomes a real one for the public, in which the space almost disappears through the way the media captures the violence in reporting the conflict.

In order to broadcast an event, be it historical or even from the battlefield, media content creators, whether it is television, print media, radio or new media, read that event in a certain key and give it a specific form depending on the vision, attitude, culture of the broadcaster, the type of media for which he/she reports, but also the technical means available (Hall & Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 2006, p. 118).

After the message acquires a certain discursive form, at the other end the receiver decodes it and gives it other meanings. Hall compares media production, especially television production, with industry, as defined by Marx, for which certain moments are of major importance: production, circulation, distribution, consumption and reproduction. (Dobrescu et al., 2007). It's the same in the media. The way the public information is consumed, its feedback, the interpretations given to the production will be considered, in a continuous circuit of wide production.

Ideally there should be a perfect symmetry between the encoding of the message transmitted without loss, without interference and the way the public decodes the message, in the same key in which it was encoded, with the same tools, without

losing or rebuilding the initial meaning. In reality we can speak, first of all, of the way the journalist chooses to look at the event, to "cut" it and to frame it in a certain way that may depend on his affinity for that subject, on education, on the way he understands what is happening, a direction set by the policy of the media trust or even certain expectations of the public. However, the initial message proposes an interpretation of a reality that usually has several facets. It is difficult especially since television, for example, transforms a complex, three-dimensional reality into a two-plane enriched with background music, voice-over and visual effects. Hence the infinity of possibilities that the television team has to recreate reality and transmit it to the public, which, in turn, has as many possibilities for decoding the message and interpreting it. That is why Hall states that there is no possibility of producing such a representation of reality without using a code. This way of looking at the message given by the media explains why we have several types of messages, visual speeches, audio, etc. of the same event. However, any producer seeks the most relevant coding for his message, so that the dominant meaning is not lost.

But when there are facts, situations that require multiple interpretations from the start, media producers can no longer hope for the desired decoding. They only draw some limits of decoding, of interpretation, which they know are unanimously accepted and documented. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided numerous such examples. Many times, the official messages, the call to trust the voice of the specialist, to critical thinking, to documentation from credible sources have been reinterpreted in different ways, depending on the beliefs of the receiver.

Hall identifies and analyzes three types of decoding. The first is dominant-hegemonic, in which the receiver gets the message and decodes it, faithfully following the intention of the one who encodes and transmits it. There is a symmetry between the way the message was encoded and its decoding. This type of coding is present rather when it comes to news, with a clear, well-defined structure, in which there are specialized voices that confirm a certain event, so that the presence of media professionals is noted rather at the technical part, the quality of the image, sound, editing, etc.

The second type of coding identified is that of the negotiated code, in which audiences receive the general, major meanings of the message transmitted. The dominant code is of hegemonic type, it represents the voice of an indisputable authority, but it also inserts particular situations, specific to a culture, regions, populations, situations, etc. which may be in slight opposition to the dominant voice. An adapted example could be the withdrawal of Coalition troops from Afghanistan.

The dominant voice agrees with the idea that 20 years is a very long period of war and that the main issues related to terrorist threats are under sufficiently strong control, which does not exclude a number of other voices that legitimately wonder what is happening and how security in the area will evolve after the total withdrawal of NATO troops.

Another example of the type of code negotiated could be analyzed in most messages regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. An official, authoritarian voice, outlined by evidence and scientific references which supported global health security was opposed by secondary voices on the questionable legitimacy of protection measures.

The third code that Stuart Hall discusses refers to the situation in which the receiver is able to decrypt, to decode the message correctly, but considers that it was encoded with the intention of misleading, of manipulating the public, pursuing rather the interest of a political, economic, ideological group, etc. The message is thus deciphered in a code opposite to its dominant meaning. In a whirlwind of media, the public that is tempted by a decoding pattern in opposite code can in turn be a good target for the alternative press, which strengthens its beliefs, using it as a good and useful distributor of false messages, such as: Vaccines are made to control us, to implant chips, to kill us for the sake of the pharmaceutical industry.

Adherents of conspiracy theory are tempted to interpret official messages as having a manipulative intent. Stuart Hall's study "had a very interesting afterlife. It is still considered today as not only one of the major achievements of the author in that extremely feverish period, but also as his most important achievement in the analysis of communication and, we would say, the study that most accurately fixes SCB's contribution to the study of communication: the discovery of active audience." (Dobrescu et al., 2007, p. 264).

The principle based on the transmission of messages according to the knowledge of the active audience is increasingly exploited with the expansion of social networks and the existence of algorithms for the exact delivery of content with which a certain type of audience resonates. From this perspective, Marian Voicu (Voicu, 2018, p. 75) analyzes the way Soviet propaganda is built, building its messages with attractive themes and slogans such as peace, democracy, national sovereignty, social equality, etc., using words and messages. Which the public wants to hear, but building meanings on metaphors deeply rooted in the collective mind of a certain audience.

Ideas such as "The European Union is a satanic project", "Russia has a holy mission to protect humanity from the deadly sins of homosexuality, pedophilia and incest,

which are wreaking havoc in the West", "Britain will do better if it leaves the EU" and the idea outlined even more clearly that any country, practically, would do better outside the EU, thus being liberated from a domination that wants to destroy its culture, family, traditions, etc. Voicu analyzes these messages transmitted by Russia in different ways, some amplified by "troll factories", explaining the mechanisms that lead in time to the formation of some beliefs or the strengthening of others.

The creation and dissemination of false messages through social networks lead in time to a growing polarization of society, to a social segregation according to age, race, religion, social class, political choice (Voicu, 2018, p. 375). Therefore, by receiving messages that resonate with the beliefs, visions, attitudes of a certain audience on certain topics, the audience is tempted to lift certain protective screens against another kind of message, to give up reason, to judge from other perspectives and to remain a prisoner of the so-called echo chambers, in which it receives only the information already validated by certain sources he trusts, by the group he belongs to, family, etc. "A first source of distortion of everyday thinking is our motivation to have a positive image of ourselves. (...) We thus sacrifice objectivity in the search for superiority over others, motivated to discover aspects in which we are better, more competent and less prone to mistakes, or the ways in which we are unique in relation to others." (Boncu & Holman, 2019, p. 12). The authors emphasize that in the face of this unprecedented flow of information, difficult to analyze, in which valid sources mix almost imperceptibly with those that generate fake-news, given that time spent online increases exponentially, the brain finds mechanisms to simplify things.

People resort to superficial thinking schemes, called heuristics, which help anticipate emotions in future situations, form impressions about others, their judgments, etc. Thinking patterns that offer quick answers, but which are at the origin of superficial judgments and sometimes the impossibility of getting out of the comfort zone offered by things known, judged and accepted a priori. "We are speaking here about distortions of knowledge of everyday life, such as those that mark the construction of counterfactual alternatives to reality, retrospective estimation of the chances of things happening in a certain way or appreciation of the real importance familiarity has in our emotional reactions" (Boncu & Holman, 2019, p. 12).

The appeal to spectacular, to emotion with the risk of distorting the reality, even of its recreation can have several causes. Some belong to the inner forum of the journalist who is present in a theater of operations, in the hostile environment of war and considers that the speech should be transmitted in a slightly accelerated tone,

others are exogenous, related to a media market in which the breaking news was brought to ridicule, now even meaning a cat that a fire crew is helping get down from the tree.

Conclusion

The role of communication is becoming increasingly complex in a world where the flow of information is experiencing unprecedented development. The multitude of messages, videos, movies, sources, some professionally constructed, whose veracity or good intentions are difficult to prove, produce either misinformation difficult to manage or a kind of mass anxiety of a society overwhelmed by the show, by the negative, by sensational.

Sometimes, following a traditional model of building a news piece, journalists can fall into the trap of legacy patterns, of models for reporting. Once on the frontline, there is a preconceived notion that the public expects something different, spectacular, that one is under the magnifying glass of the institution that sent one there, but also that one must, at the same time, obey the rigors imposed by the troops one is reporting on.

Whether it is because of a firm order from the media trust, the editor-in-chief, for the sake of the rating or simply out of the journalist's desire to come up with explosive news, subjectivity in war stories exists.

Acknowledgement

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