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War, Media, and Memory: American Television News Coverage of the Vietnam War

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The impact of visual media on policymakers and the public is an emerging area of research, rife with potential in our current digital age. In spite of growing scholarly attention, the effects of violent imagery on public opinion with respect to armed conflict remains understudied. As this paper will aim to reveal, “America’s first helicopter war” is worth analyzing from a critical lens—both literally and figuratively (Rollins 1984, 419). The Vietnam War (1955–75) has widely been considered to be “the first televised war” (Huebner 2005, 151). This exploratory essay examines the role of the media during the Vietnam War, specifically regarding American television news coverage, and its corresponding impacts—or lack thereof—on society. Contrary to popular belief, television news coverage of the Vietnam War did not directly affect public support for the war, nor did it profoundly impact American nationalism and military policy. Television news coverage did, however, influence how events of the war were perceived and remembered by the American public. Furthermore, the commonly held belief that the American news media was directly responsible for the decline of public confidence in the U.S. government, ultimately contributing to the public’s distaste for any further involvement in Vietnam, is a narrow viewpoint that does not reflect the complex reality of the situation.

Television, for obvious reasons, has been singled out as the most important news source during the war in Vietnam. The war came at a time when a growing number of American households had access to cable television. Television quickly outpaced newspapers and became the primary source of information for many Americans (McClancy 2013, 50). To date, the conflict in Vietnam remains one of the longest-running televised news stories in history, spanning 15 years of airtime (Bailey 1976, 147). Millions of Americans tuned in to watch the drama unfold, all in the comfort of their living rooms. Conventional wisdom tells us that families gathered around their television sets on a nightly basis, witnessing the horrors of battle. Television news programs such as NBC’s *Vietnam Weekly*, CBS’s *Vietnam Perspective*, and ABC’s *Scope* did in fact bring the war into American living rooms (Berg 1986, 96). Still, it is important to note that these ‘living room wars’ are not an unusual occurrence; people back home listened closely to the radio during WWII to obtain information about the events unfolding halfway across the world (Berg 1986, 96). Despite widespread television coverage of the Vietnam War, “the violence of battle was not a nightly experience for news audiences at any point during the war” (McClancy 2013, 54). This is a noteworthy point that largely gets overlooked, as one would generally assume that television networks would air Vietnam-related stories on a daily basis throughout the war.

Depending on America’s combat role, the amount of Vietnam-related television coverage varied (Bailey 1976, 150). However, it was certainly not

featured on news programs every evening (Bailey 1976, 149). Bailey's study found that networks had aired Vietnam-related stories in distinct movements (Bailey 1976, 151). From August to November 1965, the war was covered almost on a daily basis for 90% of days (Bailey 1976, 151). Yet, by August the following year, less airtime was devoted to Vietnam-related stories as the war dragged on (Bailey 1976, 151). In the fall of 1967, in the months leading up to the Tet Offensive, coverage increased dramatically and remained a hot topic of discussion during the presidential election (Bailey 1976, 152). After Nixon's election, news coverage dropped off yet again (Bailey 1976, 152). There was a spike in coverage again, from May 1969 to May 1970, as Vietnam-related stories aired 70% of days (Bailey 1976, 152). Not surprisingly, when the action on the ground heated up, networks were more likely to give Vietnam extra airtime (Bailey 1976, 153). Bailey (1976) notes that "by far most anchorman stories were about ground action" (153). In our collective public memory, there is a commonly held belief that most Americans watched graphic coverage of the combat missions taking place. Yet, Patterson's study does not support the popular belief that television news programs were riddled with footage of the horrors of combat and pictures of the dead and wounded (Patterson 1984, 403).

Depending on who you ask, the media either showed too much or too little of the conflict in Vietnam (Huebner 2005, 159). Three main television networks covered the war—NBC, CBS, and ABC (Patterson 1984, 398). CBS aired the most Vietnam-related stories, while NBC broadcast the fewest (Patterson 1984, 401). Although ABC aired fewer total news stories than CBS and NBC, including stories not pertaining to the war, the network aired the largest percentage of Vietnam-related stories in comparison to the other two networks (Patterson 1984, 401). A mere 3.1 percent of Vietnam-related stories on ABC analyzed in Patterson's sample comprised of "graphic coverage", which included film and photographs of the actual combat taking place (Patterson 1984, 401). Most news coverage featured anchormen reading stories, and did not feature accompanying visuals (McClancy 2013, 54). The majority of the stories simply reported on the dead and wounded (Patterson 1984, 402). Common to viewers was the "weekly body count" that aired once a week (Patterson 1984, 402). Actual combat footage, which was seldom aired, generally appeared as background and did not provide viewers with much information about particular events (Mandelbaum 1982, 160). Television networks were cautious not to offend their audiences and therefore chose not to show any footage that would have the potential to turn off viewers (Mandelbaum 1982, 160). It is essential to call attention to certain historical facts which must be borne in mind, as this conservative visual trend among television networks extended far beyond news coverage. During the Vietnam Era, producers were hesitant to show viewers basic human activities (Anderson 2011, 18). In fact, the popular American sitcom *The Brady Bunch* (1969–74) on set featured a

bathroom shared by six siblings which lacked a toilet (Anderson 2011, 19). As Anderson (2011) points out, “such constraints were very likely to influence the types of images thought appropriate for nightly Vietnam news programs” (19).

Mandelbaum (1982) posits that television is a “timid” form of media, often serving as background noise (160). It should also be mentioned that even if a television program is running, there is no guarantee that viewers are fully engaged in the broadcasted content or even present at all. Mandelbaum (1982) argues Americans may have learned less about the events in Vietnam through television because watching television does not require a great deal of attention, whereas reading a newspaper requires much more effort to retain the information being presented to the observer (159). If television news coverage did not show nearly as much footage of the war as people claim to remember, then why are so many Americans able to vividly recall graphic scenes during the war in Vietnam? There are a handful of highly dramatized events ingrained in the public’s memory (Patterson 1984, 403). Among these include General Loan executing a Viet Cong prisoner; the naked ‘Napalm Girl’ running down a road; a marine setting fire to a Vietnamese village using a Zippo lighter; the slaughtering of Vietnamese civilians at My Lai; and the self-immolation of a Buddhist monk. Patterson (1984) argues that “a form of selective perception” and “selective retention” on behalf of the general public led to those events being perceived as “characteristic of television coverage of the Vietnam war to a far greater extent than was actually true” (403). Audiences were attracted by the unusual graphic accounts and thus “projected these infrequent episodes as common for all television news coverage” (Patterson 1984, 404). These heightened scenes of drama likely formed a common national memory of the Vietnam War. Patterson (1984) reminds us that these were a “few highly dramatic events that occurred during a very long ten years” (403). Nevertheless, these images “are remembered by the public as symbols of [the] war” (Patterson 1984, 403).

The power of moving film and its ability to engage viewers has been largely overvalued. In fact, still photography may have more of an impact on audiences than television (Miller 2004, 262). Unlike television, iconic images are known to evoke strong emotions in viewers from the onset (Miller 2004, 262). On March 16th, 1968, between 300 and 500 Vietnamese civilians were killed in the remote village of My Lai (McClancy 2013, 58). *The Plain Dealer*, a newspaper in Cleveland, Ohio, displayed the horrific image of the slain civilians clumped on top of one another on a dirt road. Perhaps more widely remembered is the photograph of Kim Phúc, an unclothed nine-year-old Vietnamese girl running from a napalm strike. The image shows her suffering, as she is clearly frightened and in pain. Although the photograph does not show it, her back was severely burned. She later recovered from her injuries (Miller 2004, 261). Just ahead of

Kim is her brother who has “his mouth open in silent terror, an expression resembling the mask of tragedy” (Miller 2004, 276). As Miller (2004) eloquently remarks, Kim is the “incarnation of innocence” and stands for the “injustices of war” (264). She became a “symbol of the human capacity for atrocity” (Miller 2004, 261). Kim’s trauma is “both hers and not hers”, thus representing the “wounding of a collective body” (Miller 2004, 273). McClancy (2013) argues “the impact of those rare images of combat at least partly explains why such footage looms so large in the cultural memory of Vietnam” (55).

Through television, combat in Vietnam was depicted as a mundane occurrence (McClancy 2013, 51). Due to high satellite transmission costs, networks would often film in Vietnam days before and have the footage transported via air to New York, resulting in sizeable delays (McClancy 2013, 56). In an effort to avoid broadcasting dated stories, journalists focused their attention on filming general footage that was not tied to particular events, which could have the potential to be used to illustrate future news stories (McClancy 2013, 56). Consequently, networks were flooded with clips showing bomber pilots’ daily routines, as well as stories featuring soldiers’ living conditions (McClancy 2013, 56). The increased television airtime of these everyday experiences “had the unexpected effect of making the war itself seem routine” (McClancy 2013, 56). American troops were depicted “as commuters, going to work in the jungle and then returning home to base at night” (McClancy 2013, 57). Thus, television news presentations of war “reinscribed soldiering as a common enterprise” (McClancy 2013, 52).

It should not be forgotten that WWII was captured on moving film (McClancy 2013, 53). Armed conflict in WWII was perceived as a just endeavor, one that had purpose, and was subsequently depicted as “chivalric, moral, and grand” (McClancy 2013, 53). This gave Americans a sense of national identity and pride. However, in Vietnam, “soldiers did not look like heroes; they looked like 19-year-old kids describing the logistics of their first job” (McClancy 2013, 56). On August 3rd, 1965, a CBS camera crew recorded American troops destroying the village of Cam Ne, setting the straw huts ablaze using Zippo lighters (Huebner 2005, 154). Vietnamese civilians are shown crying out in utter agony, as their homes and livelihoods vanished before their eyes (Huebner 2005, 154). McClancy (2013) states “these were not men caught in the heat of battle; these were men treating destruction as commonplace employment” (58). One would assume that viewers watching at home saw these appalling scenes and decided to end their support for any U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Hallin (1993) asserts there is little doubt that news coverage did contribute to some amount of “war-weariness” on part of the public, but stresses that “this is only part of the

story” (53). We must probe deeper into the intricacies of press coverage to better understand how Americans at home felt about the war.

American military policy concerning Vietnam was influenced by public opinion (Mandelbaum 1982, 158). However, there is little evidence that television positively or negatively affected public support for the war (Mandelbaum 1982, 161). McClancy (2013) notes that combat footage is widely believed to have negatively influenced public opinion, yet this simplistic view is “based on assumptions contradicted by any study of news footage of the time” (50). Bailey (1976) points out that critics often rely on “anecdote and impressionistic memory” for their claims that media coverage of Vietnam had a profound impact on public opinion and military conduct, without “systemic research” to back up their assertions (157). Many Americans claim that had the war in Vietnam not been televised, the U.S. would not have lost. According to Mandelbaum (1982), “this has become a truism, a part of conventional wisdom about recent American history” (157). Even President Johnson criticized the news media at the time. Those arguing that television was to blame for declining public support, resulting in America’s withdrawal, turn to supposed issues of bias in the press. The main problem with their assertions is that there was little, if any, bias in media coverage during the war.

The Vietnam War is often regarded as a period where broadcast journalism “came of age” due to the increased autonomy of the media, as well as the professionalization of journalists within news organizations (Hallin 1993, 56). ‘Bias’ can be defined as the “quality of statements of opinion or of actual or supposed fact that would influence one to support or oppose” a given cause (Russo 1971, 539). Russo (1971) mentions the fact that what may be considered “fair” or “unfair” coverage will vary from person to person (543). Still, major networks did not favour any particular stories that would paint the U.S. government as incompetent and incapable of winning the war. Hallin (1984) concludes that the basic structure, level of integrity, and objective nature of journalism throughout the war was consistent and remained “more or less unchanged” (11). It is imperative to mention that investigative journalism was seldom featured in Vietnam news coverage, as most journalists relied on official government sources (Hallin 1984, 12). After the highly controversial Tet Offensive, press coverage did become more skeptical (Huebner 2005, 152). Reporters casted a critical gaze upon the Johnson Administration’s military policy, and public opinion remained divided (Huebner 2005, 152). Some media reports brought to light the struggles American troops were having with guerrilla warfare, although Huebner (2005) is quick to note that these reports “did not question the professionalism or courage” of the soldiers, but rather revealed the

difficulties faced in “their ability to get the job done in [a] particular locale of Vietnam” (153). To claim the media was pushing an agenda is foolhardy and does not do the complexity of the situation in Vietnam any justice.

On the surface, Hallin (1984) argues, one will likely hold the assumption that increased negative news coverage by American journalists after the Tet Offensive was due to some sort of oppositional, anti-establishment, and anti-war stance (11). However, this proves untrue. Interestingly, an estimated “49 percent of all [televised] domestic criticism of administration policy” during the war was made by public officials, compared to just 16 percent from journalists (Hallin 1984, 22). The remaining 35 percent of U.S. military policy criticism came from American citizens and soldiers in Vietnam (Hallin 1984, 22). Hallin (1984) concludes that “critical coverage in the latter part of the war” did not affect “basic consensus beliefs” nor was it the result of an “oppositional media” (6). News coverage after the Tet Offensive and in the subsequent years of the war was less positive than earlier on, “but not nearly so consistently negative as the conventional wisdom now seems to hold” (Hallin 1993, 57). On-screen footage of medical procedures being performed on grimacing troops, albeit rare, did convey “a picture of war that reminded viewers of its costs” (Huebner 2005, 156). Many American troops were bitter and resentful about their situation, and were depicted by the media as “victim[s] of foreign policy that landed [them] in a war that brought mounting devastation without gains on either side” (Huebner 2005, 157). As Huebner (2005) remarks, “the American soldier seemed a stoic victim of forces far beyond his control” (159). However, it is essential to note that journalists covered the conflict from a wide angle, being sure to describe and relay a diverse set of opinions and attitudes among American troops to their audiences (Huebner 2005, 159).

The Vietnam War, Hallin (1993) states, “was the first war in which reporters were routinely accredited to accompany military forces yet were not subject to censorship” (53). Although, the Nixon Administration still “retained a good deal of power to ‘manage’ the news” (Hallin 1993, 56). Huebner (2005) points to the lack of press censorship and “official control” of the media during the Vietnam Era, which was certainly not the case during WWII and the Korean War (152). However, journalists sometimes faced requests to withhold information regarding troop movements, and television networks had policies which governed the release of any footage that had the potential to upset the families of dead and wounded soldiers (Huebner 2005, 152). Despite this, television correspondents did not attempt to shield viewers from the reality of life on the ground. Americans who were exposed to the events unfolding in Vietnam through their television sets occasionally saw interviews of injured soldiers, while safely back at base, lying on their backs describing their harrowing experiences

(Huebner 2005, 153). However, these scenes do not necessarily equate to the public's distaste for armed conflict and military engagement in Vietnam. Rather, as Huebner (2005) asserts, the large body of work journalists produced revealed the complexities of modern warfare in a time where few Americans "could muster enthusiasm for the news" (159). More attention has been paid to television coverage of the Vietnam War itself, but perhaps more overlooked is network news coverage of the anti-war movement back at home.

The televised anti-war movement may have played an indirect role in shaping public opinion (Mandelbaum 1982, 164). American citizens saw others expressing their feelings publicly in city streets, demanding any U.S. involvement in Vietnam to be stopped. Television had the power to bring these scenes to viewers on a massive scale than any other medium at the time. Televised stories of the anti-war movement and the events transpiring in Vietnam were often interlinked, falling in the same news segments which ultimately, as McClancy (2013) argues, blurred "the distinction between the battlefield and the home front" (60). Producers made deliberate choices to excite their audiences by broadcasting hostile scenes in city streets between activists and police, which made the anti-war movement as a whole seem prone to violence (McClancy 2013, 62). Consequently, most Americans were not sympathetic to the anti-war movement, even if they were in agreement with the movement's goals (McClancy 2013, 61). As Mandelbaum (1982) states, "to the antiwar movement, the Vietnam War seemed a crime; to the American public it was a blunder" (166). Furthermore, Hallin (1993) argues that if news coverage accounted for growing public desire to end U.S. involvement in Vietnam, then news coverage was also responsible for the Nixon Administration's ability to "maintain majority support for its Vietnam policies through four years of war and for the fact that the public came to see the war as a 'mistake' or 'tragedy', rather than the crime the more radical opposition believed it to be" (57). Thus, Hallin (1993) reminds us to keep the significance of the media's role during the Vietnam War in perspective (56). According to Russo (1971), television news war coverage may have had the tendency to give "more attention to those opposed to the war than to those supporting it" (543). Yet, even if news coverage of the anti-war movement was a driving factor in shaping public opinion, Mandelbaum (1982) contends that America's collective decision that the war in Vietnam was too costly "had nothing to do with the fact that they learned about it from television" (167).

As this paper has demonstrated, the role the American media played in shaping the ultimate outcome of the Vietnam War is often grossly overestimated, yet should still not be discounted entirely. Television news war coverage was non-linear in that it reflected the complexities of battle, thus revealing the complexities of war itself. Critically examining network news coverage of the Vietnam War

serves as a useful case study in this regard. Scholars should recognize the phenomenon of war for what it is: complex social, cultural, and psychological events that, for better or worse, shape the world in which we live today. Wars are not simply a series of battles in which armies collide. Rather, to quote Greek philosopher Heraclitus, “war is the father of all things” and the mother of everything (Mies 2006, 19). Although American public support and military policy were not directly influenced by television news coverage, our collective memories of Vietnam were. What we remember and how we remember keeps changing, thus revealing the power the media has in shaping how we perceive and remember periods of armed conflict. Anderson (2011) states that “as television news programs change in their visual presentations of war, the way the public thinks about war may also change” (16). This is of tremendous contemporary importance because today we are witnessing new, emerging forms of media penetrating the public sphere. Time will tell which mediums will take hold. Exactly how these developing media outlets will impact our future communal and individual memories of war has yet to be determined. Both the amount and the degree of violence shown on today’s news programs “has increased exponentially”, and “today’s viewers of television news see images of injury in more than 56% of war stories, compared to just 16% during the Vietnam War” (Anderson 2011, 125). Understanding how visual media may or may not influence our attitudes toward, perceptions of, and responses to armed conflict and social unrest will become increasingly significant as younger generations flock to the Internet for not only social networking, but to obtain news and to share all types of information (Anderson 2011, 137). This topic is especially important because, as Anderson (2011) reminds us, “it is questionable if television news will remain the number one source of political information throughout the next century” (137). Therefore, it appears there is more reason now than ever before for academics to evaluate the widespread influences of visual information (Anderson 2011, 137). In closing, Rollins (1984) asks, “were Americans watching television or were they watching the war?” (429). We may never know the answer to this probing question. Future research should examine this arena, in order for us to better comprehend the intricate relationship between war, media, and contemporary society.

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