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Awe, up close, is plain awful

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Students of war and humanity will be depressed by *Embedded: The Media at War in Iraq*. A book has that effect when one of its most satisfying revelations is that American soldiers in a Black Hawk helicopter battalion "stink-palmed" US talk-show host Geraldo Rivera and recorded every stage on digital camera. That's war up close and personal.

Embedded - to use the term invented to describe the media's close-up and first-hand reporting of the Iraq war - does not explain the significance of what went on in Iraq between March 20 and May 1 2003. But its 58 accounts from a cross-section of international correspondents, photographers and other news specialists, civilian and military, lay out how the media cover modern wars. Some readers will be surprised that an Al-Jazeera correspondent was embedded with the US military. And Abu Dhabi TV correspondent Amir Al-Mounaiery, a "non-embed", offers sober cross-cultural perspectives about freedom of information.

The war in Iraq was news entertainment. This is not new or shocking. In Michael Ferrari's *Reporting America at War* (2003), veteran war correspondent Malcolm Browne recounts how in 1965 "the news president of ABC gave me the straight poop that 'television was entertainment' even in serious things like covering wars".

Embedded lets us see the effects that the embedding process, the enormous power of western military technology and the nearly instantaneous transmission of information had on how the stories of Operation Iraqi Freedom (US) and Operation Telic (UK) were told to the public back home. We viewed the fighting through 600 microscopes while special effects exploded in the background. One interviewee, British public affairs officer Lt Col Robert Partridge, a reservist, found a niche in Kuwait City for his civilian skills: "My specialty is making guns go bang in the film industry."

Imagine that the British and American governments wanted to wage war with saturated television coverage, but without Vietnam-style reporting that might raise questions about the war's aims, means and direct or collateral results. They might fight fast, end quickly, control the range of vision of critically minded correspondents by encasing them in tanks and Humvees with sympathetic soldier crews on whom their lives depended, drown out their voices by adding hundreds of other "war correspondents" who viewed the war as a once-in-a-lifetime adventure and a major boost up the career ladder, and keep media people away from destruction being wrought on civilians.

Editors Bill Katovsky and Timothy Carlson use Michael Corleone's advice in *The Godfather, Part Two* to explain why our governments used embedding: "Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer." Embedding is a shrewd way of giving most of the public most of what they want and little of what governments do not want them to get.

In 1991, the US government controlled the media during Operation Desert Storm by pooling, that is to say, by hand-dispensing information to restricted groups of reporters and media organisations. In March-April, 2003, the masterstroke was to exert control over coverage by seeming to democratise and free it. Although 600 embeds participated, Christiane Amanpour describes embedding as "just another pool".

Grasping this, *New York* magazine's Michael Wolff asked General Vincent Brooks at a briefing at Centcom, the Central Command media centre in Doha, Qatar, "Why are we here? Why should we stay? What's the value of what we are learning at this million-dollar press centre?" Brooks replied that Wolff was free to go home.

After May 1, many media people did just that. Our governments announced that the major fireworks were over. Sustained spectacles of shock and awe are no more. Instead there are small, random incidents that no longer shock but are still awful. Continuing violence and death, high levels of troop and resource deployment, and the challenges of constructing a viable free and democratic Iraq, do not hold our interest. By July 4 2003, a mere 23 media people remained embedded with US forces.

This is ironic. The media people in *Embedded* emphasise time and again that their best stories from the war's 41-day combat phase were of small, random incidents, such as the accidental Karbala checkpoint killing of a carload of Iraqi family members driving desperately to reach freedom, or the terrorist killing of Marine 2nd Lt Shane Childers at 9 am on the first day of fighting. Such incidents occur now without embedded coverage. Defenders of embedding rightly stress that it gave us many stories of the determination, bravery and decency of our common soldiers.

Was anything lost? *Los Angeles Times* reporter Geoffrey Mohan worries about objectivity: "No matter how much you guard against it, you start to identify with the people that you're embedded with... you lose sympathy toward the enemy dead, or those you classify as the enemy." But BBC News special correspondent Ben Brown explains: "I don't feel that our objectivity was ever suspended, really. I was very aware that this was a very unpopular war [in the UK]... so there was no way you could be gung-ho."

The main loss was in portraying the collateral human cost that must be weighed when evaluating any war against possible alternative courses of action. CNN correspondent Martin Savidge comments: "We didn't allow human suffering to be seen in America. There is a tendency on the part of domestic networks not to show that... People die gruesome, terrible deaths. But in the end we'll edit that down. Especially anything that deals with US service personnel." Brown claims this played out similarly in the UK.

Detroit News reporter John Benbow captures this problem in the anger of an Iraqi freedom fighter translator from Dearborn, Michigan, when Marines in his unit behaved callously around Iraqi corpses. "The capacity we have to kill is so chillingly efficient. We don't even comprehend what those people felt. I saw them without their skulls. I saw them disembowelled. I saw them shot up and raked by helicopter fire."

Such images were not shown on eyewitness news in Dearborn or in Detroit.

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