

# Ethical Ideals in Journalism: Civic Uplift or Telling the Truth?

James B. Murphy

*Department of Government  
Dartmouth College*

Stephen J. A. Ward

*School of Journalism  
University of British Columbia*

Aine Donovan

*Ethics Institute  
Tuck School of Business  
Dartmouth College*

□ *In this article, we explore the tension between truth telling and the demands of civic life, with an emphasis on the tension between serving one's country and reporting the truth as completely and independently as possible. We argue that the principle of truth telling in journalism takes priority over the promotion of civic values, including a narrow patriotism. Even in times of war, responsible journalism must not allow a narrow patriotism to undermine its commitment to truth telling. Journalists best fulfill their civic role by adopting the perspective of a democratic patriotism. We conclude that if news organizations accept the primacy of truth telling and democratic patriotism, they should not embed reporters with military units, or if they do, they have an ethical obligation to implement special editorial precautions.*

Does WMD stand for “weapons of mass destruction” or “words of mass deception”? In the buildup to the U.S. invasion of Iraq and during the war that followed, truth was often the first casualty. News media accepted too readily official statements that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. Major American news organizations were too eager to spin a heroic but largely false tale about Private Jessica Lynch. Leading news outlets eagerly embedded reporters with military units without giving enough thought to protecting the independence of their war coverage.

In this article, we explore the multidimensional tension between truth telling and the demands of civic life with an emphasis on the tension between serving one's country and reporting the truth as completely and independently as possible. In the first section, we explore the philosophical issue of whether, in journalism, the truth-telling principle trumps other

principles, such as minimizing the harm that reporting may do to individuals, groups, or government. In the second section, we examine the difficult relation between patriotism and truth-telling journalism. In the final section, we critique the decision by news organizations to embed reporters with American military units fighting in Iraq.

We argue that the truth-telling principle takes priority over principles and values that stem from civic duty. Even in times of war and insecurity, responsible journalism must not allow a narrow patriotism to undermine its commitment to truth telling. Journalists best fulfill their civic role by adopting the perspective of a democratic patriotism. Democratic patriotism requires journalists to provide critical perspectives and tough-minded reportage to help the public evaluate military policy and calls for war. We conclude that if news organizations accept the primacy of truth telling and democratic patriotism, they have only two ethical options. First, they should not embed reporters with military units; alternatively, if they do embed reporters, they have an ethical obligation to implement special editorial precautions and procedures.

### **Part 1: Truth or Civic Consequences?**

Journalism today faces a two-part indictment in the wake of numerous scandals revealing fabrication and bias in reporting, scandals that have contributed to a serious decline in the public credibility of news media. First, journalists are accused of failing, if not undermining, our democracy, and second, they are charged with betraying the truth (Fallows, 1996; Gans, 2003). Neither accusation is new or surprising. Because many journalists claim to play a major role in creating an informed, active citizenry, journalists cannot avoid some of the blame for the increase in public cynicism about politics and democratic institutions. Similarly, because journalists also claim to seek the truth and to report it accurately, they are subject to scathing attacks when they are sloppy, biased, or worse, deliberately fraudulent. What journalism's critics fail to note, however, is that journalists undermine themselves in thinking they can pursue civic virtue and intellectual integrity equally; by aiming at both simultaneously, they often end up achieving neither.

Far from emphasizing the independent value of truth telling, some journalists and critics of news media agree that truth telling is only instrumentally valuable because it promotes civic values. The problem with regarding truth seeking as entirely (or mainly) instrumental is that where truth seeking does not promote certain civic values or where negative consequences may follow from a truthful report, the journalist may feel that it is necessary to restrain the impulse to tell the whole truth.

The list of civic values that may influence journalism truth telling is diverse. It includes the desire to serve one's country, to support one's sol-

diers in combat, to serve the overall public good, to foster social solidarity, to create active self-governing citizens, and to advance the interests of minority groups that have suffered from discrimination.

The general attitude that truth telling is mainly (or only) a means to a robust civic life can be seen, for example, in the writings of the civic journalism movement that arose in the United States in the 1990s (Rosen, 1996). In this view, journalists are to act as catalysts for civic participation on important issues and to make sure public life goes well. Citizens of a democracy cannot exercise their sovereignty unless they are well informed about the relevant political news and are able to take part in shaping political decisions. The chief duty of journalists is to promote popular sovereignty and deliberative democracy (Gans, 2003; Merritt, 1995).

Although there is much to admire about this ideal, the danger of civic journalism emerges where truth telling and civic values conflict. For example, if a journalist is motivated to promote certain rights-seeking groups or to enhance social solidarity, should he or she not report damaging facts about these groups? Should he or she avoid stories that might cause tension among ethnic or racial groups? Take another example: Should truth telling be compromised if negative reports on political activities might discourage citizens from participating in politics? In many contexts, the unvarnished truth might in various ways stifle or undermine civic values. If the truth about our politics is too multifaceted and subtle, too overwhelming and discouraging, or too ugly and shameful, citizens might well respond with cynicism, apathy, and escapism. The Watergate revelations in some ways damaged democracy by alienating many young citizens from politics (Eksterowicz & Roberts, 2000).

Civic philosophies of journalism, philosophies that make civic values primary and truth instrumental, often naively assume that journalists can create informed citizens by simply offering information. As Gans (2003) argued, "Merely supplying them [citizens] with information does not make them into informed citizens. The people have to participate, for example, by wanting and using the information, perhaps by incorporating it into what they already know" (p. 56). Being an informed citizen does not make one an active citizen. Many people take a purely spectator interest in politics; they want to be informed but not active. Conversely, many active citizens are not informed citizens, and these activists have little motivation to seek out information unsupportive of their cause (Gans, 2003).

Another problem with making truth telling a means to broader civic goals is that other, less reputable means may serve the same purpose. There is no necessary connection between truthful information and the raising of citizens' concerns (or the desire to get involved in an issue). Misinformation, such as a sensational report about the propensity of some racial minorities to commit violent crime or a biased report on the

environmental record of a large corporation, may have more effect on citizens than a balanced, nuanced report. Therefore, a journalist seeking to act as a catalyst may feel tempted to trade in distorted or slanted information to obtain maximum effect. In this way, an unsightly disregard for the truth is dressed up in a noble love for democracy.

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Journalists need a more compelling vision of the value of truth telling, if this central ethical principle is not to be compromised or trumped by other principles. Equally important is the need to construct an appropriate notion of journalism truth seeking that does not presuppose that journalism, on most days, amounts to scientific knowledge or firm truth. Human beings cannot be said to know something, in a strong sense of know, unless it is true and well supported by evidence. However, much of what journalists report is too cursory, too immediate, too out of context to be described as genuine knowledge. Journalists, in their attempt to know, must work against daily deadlines, restrictions on information gathering, media manipulators, and a cacophony of conflicting claims from rival groups. In times of war, journalists face even further restrictions. Combat blocks access to war zones, and government propaganda machines target reporters. The journalist occupies an epistemologically precarious position (Ward, 2005). The journalist's search for truth is the difficult, evolving, and fallible attempt to slowly separate fact from fiction and rumor from evidence. Journalism truth is a "protean thing which, like learning, grows as a stalagmite in a cave, drop by drop over time" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001, p. 44). No wonder many journalists like to defend their craft on civic rather than truth-telling grounds.

Even if journalism often fails to achieve truth or knowledge, it is important for journalists to adopt the virtues of truth seeking. What are these virtues? Sincerity is important because it is the precondition for trust between journalists and their audience. Audiences will make allowances for mistakes, exaggeration, and even bias, but they will not tolerate being manipulated by an insincere journalist who reports what he does not believe. However, sincerity is not a sufficient condition for truth. Human beings can sincerely report falsehoods if they genuinely believe them. Beyond sin-

cerity, the virtues of truth seeking must include the virtues of carefulness: accuracy, perseverance, and thoroughness. However, even these virtues are not sufficient because someone can be accurate, persevering, and thorough in the pursuit of a self-serving, fanatical ideology. Therefore, genuine conscientiousness in the pursuit of truth demands higher order virtues, such as impartiality, humility, courage, and a willingness to follow the facts where they lead.

Truth seeking in journalism also requires a diversity of sources and the avoidance of a narrow notion of balance. Where the truth is unknown or contentious, journalists often must fall back on providing a balance of views. Too often, providing balance deteriorates into a mindless reporting of only two sides of an issue, often two politically partisan views. Just as some politicians routinely ignore minority, fringe, and radical views, so do some journalists. There may be good political reasons for structuring electoral contests between only two major parties, but for seeking the truth, canvassing only two views (and a fortiori two mainstream views) is unjustified. Only radical and fringe perspectives are likely to probe the assumptions that both mainstream political parties share. The assumption that the truth emerges from the clash of just two political views, Republican or Democrat, is dangerously naïve.

What reasons support the choosing of truth telling over civic ideals where they conflict? First is the argument from expertise. Most journalists cannot claim expertise about the nature and promotion of civic values, but they can claim some expertise in finding accurate information about current issues. Although some journalists become experts on their beats, most journalists ought to aim to be quick studies, that is, short-order scholars. Hence, they should acquire, as much as possible within severe time constraints, the scholarly virtues of accuracy, precision, thoroughness, intellectual humility, impartiality, and courage. They need to test their reports with the best available standards and methods of verification.

Second is the argument from uncertainty about the effects of reportage. Except in times of war or other national emergency, journalists are usually in no position to judge in an accurate manner the civic consequences of their work. It is difficult to anticipate the effect of even the most mundane stories. Better for journalists to aim primarily at truth telling than to focus on some dimly perceived consequences in the future. Democratic values are better served when we ask journalists to seek the truth without attempting to calculate in advance the gains or losses for one's country or civic culture.

Finally, there is the argument from the globalization of news media. To adopt the primacy of civic values in journalism is to imagine a world in which journalists are attached primarily to their own country and national community. However, today we receive news largely from a globalized media industry lacking any particular attachment to national political

communities. It is absurd to expect a BBC journalist from India to promote American civic values. A parochial civic philosophy of journalism is ill suited to the global news media of today, where stories have consequences that extend far beyond national borders. A global, cosmopolitan journalism may offer more truthful reportage than a journalism attached to national civic values (Ward, 2005). For domestic or global media, a firm attachment to truth telling, despite its complexities, remains the best primary principle of responsible journalism.

## Part 2: The Problem of Patriotism

The conflict between truth telling and civic values in journalism is evident in times of conflict and insecurity. News organizations come under severe social pressure to report in an uncritical, patriotic manner. Patriotism, in this context, is not just a benign affection for one's country. It is a demand that the news media support the government's policies, institutions, or head of state. If news media cave in to that demand, journalism blurs into propaganda. Bad news is minimized. Exaggerated stories about battlefield atrocities and hometown heroes multiply. Truth telling suffers.

The September 11 terrorist attacks showed clearly that patriotism was still a major influence on journalism, creating a tension between the journalist as impartial communicator and the journalist as patriotic citizen. Faced with a nation reeling from fear and anger, U.S. news organizations came under pressure to support the president's war on terrorism. In an interview with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (2002), CBS anchor Dan Rather was asked whether watching American coverage of the war on terrorism was like watching journalists rooting for the hometown football team. He replied

Yes, and if not rightfully so, which I believe it to be, then certainly understandably so. "9-11" didn't change everything but it changed some things and it changed some fundamental things with American journalists, including this one. I think [in] the coverage of the military operations in Afghanistan. ... The military got the benefit of almost every doubt, the defense department, the civilian control got even more benefit of even more doubt, with probably less reason. I'm an American. I'm an American reporter. I'm pulling for our military to win whatever the definition of win is. I say that with no apologies. But I'm also a lifetime journalist, I want to be that ideal honest broker of information but I also want to be a patriot.

Rather candidly described the journalist's conflict between patriotism and honest journalism. Nevertheless, his comments are disturbing because they suggest that reporters might compromise their truth telling.

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What is the proper relation between journalism and patriotic citizenship? Is there a type of patriotism compatible with modern democracies and journalism? What patriotism is and whether partiality is a virtue or vice, is a source of philosophical and political debate (Cottingham, 1986; MacIntyre, 1984; Walzer, 1990). Amid this variety of perspectives, in this article, we argue that a moderate form of patriotism is significantly compatible with ethical journalism. It may be called *democratic patriotism*.

Democratic patriotism is a love of *patria* understood as a republic, not as native soil or as belonging to a culturally exclusive group. It is a modern elaboration of republican patriotism, which goes back to the Italian city states of the early Renaissance and, ultimately, Roman antiquity (Honohan, 2002; Skinner, 1978). Democratic patriotism is a love of the principles, rights, institutions, and laws of a republic of free, self-governing citizens. The republic is not loved primarily because of its physical attributes or because it is supposedly superior in language, culture, or race. The republic is loved because it is a country that makes possible the existence of citizens as rights-bearing individuals committed to the ideals of liberty (Viroli, 1995, 2002). Democratic patriotism is a form of patriotism appropriate to the political perspective that Rawls (1993) called *political liberalism*. The democratic patriot is attached to inclusive liberal institutions that allow a reasonable pluralism of philosophies of life to flourish (Rawls, 1993, p. 36).

As an attitude and emotion, democratic patriotism is inclusive, restrained, and open to rational evaluation. It is criterion based.<sup>1</sup> Democratic patriotism is inclusive because it speaks for the liberty of all citizens. It is not xenophobic toward other peoples. Democratic patriotism lacks the aggressiveness often associated with nationalism and extreme forms of patriotism. Openness to reason is crucial because loyalty is a demanding emotion, prone to abuse. Patriotism must be limited by what other loyalties reasonably require. Patriotism should be a "judgment-sensitive attitude" that is open to the force of reasons and facts (Scanlon, 1998, p. 20). Openness to reason is essential because it is not always clear in advance what actions are patriotic and best promote a republic of free citizens.

To be open to reason means that any appeal to patriotism to support a country's foreign or military policy should be judged by three general criteria. One, the claim must survive sustained public scrutiny. Two, the policy must be consistent with fair relations among countries. Three, the policy must not violate principles of morality and international law, espe-

cially principles of human rights. Such evaluation can only be made in a public sphere that is open and informed by an impartial free press.

Over 100 million people were killed in wars during the last century alone, amid patriotic bugle calls and a patriotic press. Tolstoy (1987) inveighed against this extreme patriotism: "Seas of blood have been shed over this passion (of patriotism) and will yet be shed for it, unless the people free themselves of this obsolete relic of antiquity" (p. 142). Tolstoy's warning is valuable, but his analysis is mistaken. The challenge is not to eliminate patriotism. Rather, it is to develop a public discourse of moderate, democratic patriotism that discredits more extreme, authoritarian forms.

### **Democratic Patriotism and Journalism**

Given this brief discussion, we begin to appreciate the complex relation between journalism and patriotic citizenship. To arrive at a correct perspective on this relation, we must keep in mind the primary, democratic function of journalism. The journalist has a democratic role that is different from the role of the citizen. Every person, as a citizen and patriot, has a number of broad rights and obligations. All citizens have the right to vote, to influence public policy, to engage in political activity, to live under the rule of law, and so on. Democratic patriotism adds the further requirement that citizens harbor a special affection for their republic and be ready to defend its values. When individuals become journalists, however, they take on an additional, distinctive set of duties and principles that may come into conflict with their activities as citizens. The distinct duties are based on journalism's social contract with the public it serves. Through the contract, the public (or society) grants certain freedoms to the press on the expectation that journalists will fulfill a range of beneficial social functions responsibly.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most important functions of journalists is to speak to the public in a manner that is different from partisan communicators, such as that of the social advocate, lobbyist, or public relations expert. Professional journalism is the organized, socially recognized activity of communicating to the public, for the public, from the impartial perspective of the public good. It serves the democratic well-being of citizens as a whole. Journalism cannot be reduced to the dissemination of data, gossip, or propaganda. It is the impartial dissemination and analysis of the most important truths for a self-governing polity. Journalism should be a "particular kind of democratic practice" (Carey, 2000, p. 22).

This primary role requires that journalists refuse to cave in to demands that they provide uncritical support for government or war. It requires that they fulfill their duty to truth telling and maintain their independence from government. Their duty is to provide objective information and critical analysis for democratic deliberation (Fishkin, 1991). Even in times of uncer-



tainty, journalists have a duty to continue to provide news, investigations, controversial analysis, and multiple perspectives. They should not mute their criticisms, and they should maintain skepticism toward all sources. Journalists need to unearth and explain the roots of their country's problems and coolly assess alleged threats. Although the journalist may share the patriots' goal of serving the public, he or she serves that public best by continuing to inform the public in a critical and rational manner. If the journalist decides that circumstances require that he or she join the military or become a partisan communicator, he or she should stop acting as a journalist.

The democratic role of journalism makes it almost unavoidable that there will be tension between how an individual should act as a journalist and how an individual should act as a patriotic citizen. The democratic values of journalism will come up against the claims of patriotism when a country decides to go to war, to deny civil liberties for security reasons, or to ignore the constitution to quell domestic unrest. In these situations, some members of the public and the government will call on news organizations to stand up for America.<sup>3</sup>

The conflict between the roles of journalist and citizen will be greater or less depending on what form of patriotism is in question. If the appeal is to democratic patriotism, as defined previously, there will be fewer occasions for conflict because there is a substantial overlap among the ideals and values of democratic patriotism and journalism. The democratic patriot and the journalist, therefore, will be on the same side of a number of public issues. Both will support accurate, unbiased information, free speech, critical news media, and a public sphere with diverse perspectives. Both will favor the protection of liberties, transparency in public affairs, and the rational evaluation of appeals to patriotism.

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However, if the appeal is to extreme patriotism, the conflict will be acute. Extreme patriotism is largely incompatible with democratic journalism because it tends to support strict editorial limits on the press, or it exerts pressure on journalists to be uncritical, partisan, or economical with the truth. However, even where democratic patriotism is in question, there is room for conflict. When a country mobilizes for war or recovers from a terrorist attack, even democratic patriots may feel that the journalist should water down his or her truth telling and become more of a partisan.

This ethical perspective, that the democratic role of journalism entails special duties to impartial, critical truth telling, rejects Rather's musings on

patriotism (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2002). The journalist's role is not, as Rather stated, "pulling for our military to win." It is not to give the military "the benefit of almost every doubt." The journalists' role is to inquire critically into what their military and their government are doing and where they are taking the public. The role of journalism is not to keep morale high by refusing to publish stories about body bags returning home from war. Its role is not to demonize the enemy or to fabricate stories of heroes. The duty of every journalist is to continue to be an ideal broker of information and not be distracted by the familiar charge of being unpatriotic or the fear of social condemnation.

If journalists abandon their primary democratic role, they will fail to help the public rationally assess public policy and appeals to patriotism. Journalists' well-meaning desire to be patriotic may, in fact, assist the manipulation of public opinion if they do not question the powerful emotions of patriotism. Dan Rather was right on one score. Journalists, as citizens, cannot be indifferent to acts of terrorism or the fate of their country. However, journalists must be vigilant that no one manipulates these honest emotions. In the fog of war, truth is the first casualty. A blind patriotism or a wobbly attachment to truth telling in journalism only thickens the fog.

### **Part 3: Embedded Reporters: Access or Independence?**

In Part 1 of this article, we raised the general danger of compromising the primary principle of truth telling. In the following section, we examine how a narrow patriotism can cause journalists to limit their truth telling. In this final section, we explore another threat to truth telling: the embedding of reporters in combat units. The problem of embedding brings together issues raised in previous sections. In their desire to be embedded, reporters and news organizations may fail to adhere to truth telling as their primary ethical principle. Feelings of patriotism may cause embedded journalists to identify psychologically with their military units and, thereby, consciously or unconsciously, bias their reports.

The political decision to embed reporters with U.S. combat troops in Iraq is unique in American history. Hundreds of journalists from print and television, from conservative and liberal news organizations, clamored to participate in the program. They were eager to cover a war for a nation that had become obsessed with retribution for September 11. What is striking, especially for those outside the field of journalism, is the limited discussion within journalism about the potential conflicts of interest for embedded reporters, despite such ethical principles as journalistic objectivity and independence. These principles are essential to claims that the press constitutes a fourth branch of government. The press is "seen as an independent ob-

server of political power, having the right and the responsibility to maintain its independence of government" (Mermin, 1999, p. 6).

War, with its emotional drain on the national psyche, places a heavy burden on the journalist to uphold these standards of truth telling. Indeed, it may fall to the journalist to report on facts that could potentially sway support away from a war. The responsibility to report such unpopular facts is urgent, given the public's dependence on the news media. As Kuypers (2002) stated, "Americans look to the press to provide the information they need to make informed political choices" (p. 197). However, this information is often shaped by political forces. Those political forces have historically shaped a significant portion of war coverage, with reporters offering stories that were tainted by excessive casualty rates, a persuasive political agenda or, as in the case of the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a fascination with the technology rather than the moral implications of warfare.

Garnering public support for the invasion of Iraq posed a substantial challenge to the legitimacy of the Bush administration around the world. The justification for an invasion into the sovereign country of Iraq was questionable. However, not enough American journalists reported on this apparent violation of international law. Too many news organizations, such as the Fox News network, joined in the public's readiness to support the Bush administration in its war on terrorism.

News organizations should have taken a more critical approach to embedding if only for the fact that the program was carefully developed and implemented by government and military leaders to produce the most favorable coverage of the invasion. On October 30, 2002, as preparations for an invasion progressed, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld announced the embedded program for reporters in the war against Iraq. Rumsfeld's decision came as a surprise given that he had previously stated that the leak of classified information to journalists was a criminal offense that was worthy of jail. With this background, it is perhaps understandable how the administration came to the conclusion that having the media trained, briefed on a daily basis, and working alongside combatants would "reduce the flow of classified information to the Al-Qaida terrorist network through American and foreign news media" (Burns, 2002).

The reporters selected for the embedded program were required to attend a 1-week training session that highlighted the basics of warfare, with an emphasis on nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. Although the training was thorough enough for basic competency in the field, a 1-week session cannot provide a journalist the essential tools for battlefield readiness. That deficiency led reporters such as Robert Jensen (2003) to caution against the embed program. Jensen stated that once a journalist accepts a Department of Defense (DOD) position on the front lines, he or she has traded independence for access. The notion of impartiality is under threat when journalists report on sol-

diers who are responsible for the journalists' safety. Jensen (2003) highlighted the blurring of those lines with an example from the March 19 *CBS News* in which Jim Axelrod, "embedded with the 3rd Infantry, discussed an intelligence briefing he sat in on and said, 'We've been given orders.' Realizing what he had said, he revised himself" (p. A8). However, those slips of tongue were a common occurrence throughout the war, signifying the inherent danger to the embedding program: that journalistic impartiality is susceptible to the psychological pull toward group affiliation and security.

Moreover, the DOD selected large news organizations that might provide the most favorable coverage for the highly prized embedded slots. When questioned about the practice, Rumsfeld said that the matter was "too far down in the weeds for his attention. ... It's below my radar screen, I don't look and see who's in and who's out and who's doing this and who's doing that. I just don't know" (Gertz & Scarborough, 2003). The Secretary of Defense may have been unaware of who was in and who was out, but the process was clearly not random. Positions on the front lines were awarded to major news organizations such as NBC and *The Washington Post*; less visible organizations such as *Mother Jones* and other left-of-center publications were denied access.

The program was designed by DOD personnel, under the guidance of Bryan Whitman and Victoria Clarke, and was closely monitored in DOD's J-5 Strategy Division by military personnel who were keenly aware of the power the press would have over national opinion on the war. In an unclassified information paper written by Colonel Jerry Sullivan on March 24, 2003, the DOD laid out its position on embedding. Key points included the fact that many Americans believed that the media had been "co-opted by the Department of Defense and are part of a USG [United States Government]-sponsored propaganda campaign" (p. 1). On the other hand, Sullivan's one-page report also included the far-right perspective that the liberal media "insisted on embedding for the sole purpose of defeating or thwarting the objectives of the coalition" (p. 1). Those two extremes were mediated by a majority of Americans, who according to the report, were merely tiring of round-the-clock coverage. What the DOD hoped to gain from the embedded experience was a better public perception of the soldier's experience and a greater appreciation of combat operations from the reporter's perspective. The DOD also hoped for increased recruiting efforts and better relations with foreign countries through embedded reporting. The DOD also had a number of fears: possible information leaks, an increased cynicism toward the government and its state-sponsored media, and a resentment among some military personnel against reporters who receive special attention from the DOD. The DOD accepted, albeit cautiously, the administration's decision to embed reporters in hopes of gaining more than they might lose. This shift in policy was monumental for active military personnel, who traditionally regard news media as dubious vehicles of truth telling.

The reporters who signed on to the embedded program agreed to limitations on their reporting. Some journalists, such as Bernard Shaw, a former Gulf War reporter, explained the problem of embedding in a CNN television interview:

The idea of journalists allowing themselves to be taken under the wing of the United States military to me is very dangerous. I think journalists who agree to go with combat units effectively become hostages of the military, which can control the movements of the journalists and, more importantly, control their ability to file their stories. (Bushell & Cunningham, 2003, p. xx)

In addition, reporters covering the Iraq war were under the pressure of Internet time, throwing stories onto the internet with very little time to check facts or corroborate points. However, in the end, the American public got what Rumsfeld described as a “slice of war.” Journalist Tom Rosenstiel described the war coverage as “largely anecdotal, both exciting and dull, combat focused, and mostly live and unedited. Much of it lacks context but it is usually rich in detail” (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2003).

A number of reporters were pulled from the war zone in Iraq when they crossed the line between reporting “details of tactical deployments, precise location, specific number of troops, or identification of casualties before next of kin had been notified” (Katovsky & Carlson, 2003, p. xv). It is significant to note how few embedded reporters violated the DOD prohibitions against revealing these specifics. Among the reporters who fell into trouble with the military during the war, many of the most notable—Peter Arnett, Geraldo Rivera, and Phillip Smucker—were not embedded reporters.

Professional self-regulation rather than military censorship was the norm for the more than 600 embedded reporters. Moreover, the Bush administration reacted strongly to reporters who asked politically insensitive questions that annoyed military and civilian leaders. For example, during the invasion of Iraq, Michael Wolff, the *New York Magazine* media critic, asked General Vincent Brooks at a CENTCOM (United States Central Command) press briefing

A series of rapid-fire questions ... “I mean no disrespect, but what is your value proposition? Why are we here? Why should we stay? What’s the value we’re learning in this million dollar press center?” Brooks responded, “you are here on your own volition and if it isn’t satisfactory to you, then go home.” (Katovsky & Carlson, 2003, p. 39)

The danger of embedded reporting, aside from the potential loss of independence and impartiality, is that it elbows out other forms of journalism. War reporters cease to be careful interpreters of information. They become human conduits for the relentless flow of fragments of text, images, audio, and hurried commentary. In the excitement of war, news organizations forget that journalism is more than breathless spot news from

embedded reporters. It is about explaining what one is seeing, it is about questioning and investigating, and it is making sure that one's overall reportage has a diversity of voices and perspectives. Good reportage delves into causes and consequences. It reveals as propaganda the dubious claims and simplifications by both sides.

For now and for the foreseeable future, embedding is part of the future of war reporting. So, news organizations need to debate urgent ethical questions such as these: Does embedding serve the public interest? Is it compatible with journalistic principles? Will news organizations embed reporters in the future? No journalist who believes in free and independent journalism should feel comfortable about simply accepting the restrictions of embedded reporting.

In this article, we argue that the preferred option is to avoid the use embedded reporters wherever possible. However, if a news organization decides to embed reporters, it has an ethical obligation to put in place editorial policies that reduce the potential negative effects of embedding. Embedding is irresponsible unless every precaution is taken to ensure accurate, comprehensive, and diverse coverage.

Some basic editorial provisions for embedding news organizations are

- *Invest in nonembedded journalism:* News organizations that embed must also assign unilateral (nonembedded) journalists to the conflict.
- *Provide context:* Explain the disconnected facts of embedded reports by the use of a diversity of experts and sources. Seek out reports that contradict or balance embedded reports. Include analysts who do not support the war.
- *Edit skeptically:* Question official reports and numbers from all sides.
- *Show the human face of war:* Balance reports on the technology of war with coverage of civilians killed, maimed, or displaced by the technology.
- *Avoid cheerleading:* Hold embedded reports to the same standards as other news reports. Avoid patriotic prattle, excessive military jargon, fluff interviews with "heroes," and the biased language of *we* and *they*.
- *Monitor embedded reporters:* Consider rotating or removing reporters who appear to be identifying too strongly with their military units.
- *Be transparent:* Provide the public with transparent (and repeated) explanations about editorial restrictions. Publish information that had been restricted immediately after the conflict ends, if not sooner.

## Conclusions

In this article, we have stressed that the future of independent, public-interest journalism in the political climate of today depends on a reaffirmation of the primacy of the principle of truth telling. The need for a reaffirmation of truth telling is shown by the serious compromising of this

principle during recent coverage of the war on terrorism, including the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the continuing conflict in Iraq. The distorting effects of patriotism in general, and embedded reporting specifically, places an ethical onus on journalists to rethink their commitments to impartial and independent journalism and to consider their role as members of the fourth estate. Ultimately, however, news organizations must do more than affirm the principle. They need to articulate for the public and for their reporters their standards of war coverage and how they intend to respond to any future program of embedding.

### Notes

1. Nathanson (1993) outlined a moderate, criterion-based patriotism in his *Patriotism, Morality and Peace*. A criterion-based patriotism expects one's country to satisfy a number of criteria and values. This makes the country worthy of loyalty and pride. MacIntyre (1984) and Oldenquist (1982) have argued that a criterion-based patriotism—what Oldenquist called an “impartial patriotism”—cannot be a true patriotism because loyalty to my country is based on a particular attachment to this country as mine. Patriotism cannot be a loyalty to abstract moral principles. Democratic patriotism does not deny that patriotism is an emotion based on the contingent fact that this is my country. However, it insists that this loyalty, like all loyalties, must be open to criticism and evaluation.
2. On the idea of a social contract and the expectation of public benefits, see Klaidman and Beauchamp (1987, p. 126–38). The benefits include the provision of accurate and balanced information on the economy, health, politics, and other essential areas. Also, the press is expected to act as a watchdog on other institutions and to provide a forum for the exchange of views.
3. A July 2003 opinion survey by the Pew Center for the People and the Press found that 70% of Americans thought it was a good thing for news organizations to take a “strong pro-American point of view,” although 64% also favored “neutral” coverage of war. Available at [www.pew.org](http://www.pew.org).

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