



The Media and War: An Interview with Daniel Hallin

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Renowned political communications scholar Daniel Hallin talks about the media coverage of the Vietnam war and the lasting legacy of this event regarding the relationship between the media and the state during wartime.

Q. Much discussion on the media and war often focuses on the Vietnam War, which was described as “the living room war” and the first “television war.” The conventional wisdom held by many is that the media helped lose the war for America in Vietnam. How does this story normally go?

This particular version of the conventional wisdom is held by those on the political right, who are supporters of the Vietnam war. The argument is that the US could have won the Vietnam war, if it had not lost the political “will” to persist; and media coverage is assumed to have played a central role in undermining political will. It was often assumed that television had a decisive impact: people saw the “true horror of war” night after night on their television screens, and for this reason turned against the war.

Q. In *The Uncensored War* (1986), you challenge this belief about the role of the U.S. media during the Vietnam war. In your research, what did you discover about this argument that an independent, adversarial media cost the U.S. military victory in Vietnam?

Three points here. First, if you look at the record of US decision-making on the Vietnam war, as documented, first of all, in the “Pentagon Papers,” it is clear that policy-makers had determined that the war could not have been won at reasonable cost, regardless of the level of public support or the role of the media. More specifically, on the role of the media, I found that the media were more followers than leaders in the change of opinion and of policy. They followed the judgements of policy-makers, who increasingly came to see the

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war as unwinnable, of the public at large, and also of American troops in the field, who increasingly came to consider the war senseless. Finally, as far as television was concerned, television did not show the “true horror of war” night after night to its audience. Television coverage was very sanitized and was mostly positive in the early part of the war. Television was particularly concerned about upsetting its audience—or advertisers—with graphic or critical coverage.

Q. The term “Vietnam Syndrome” has been used to describe the mentality of the U.S government and its military towards the media in the wars after the Vietnam campaign. How did the Vietnam experience effect the relationship between the U.S. media, the military and the government in the decades which followed?

The Vietnam, Syndrome was a term that was coined by supporters of an active, interventionist military role of the US in world politics, to refer to the reluctance of the public after Vietnam to become involved in war. It was often attributed to the influence of the media, and for many years after the war the military therefore adopted particularly restrictive policies toward media coverage of military action.

Q. Is this belief in the “Vietnam Syndrome” something unique to the U.S. or has it effected the relationship between journalists and the government in other democratic states during wartime?

The military in other countries also accepted the conventional wisdom in the US that news coverage inevitably undermined public support for war and restricted the media accordingly. This policy was first adopted by the British during the Falklands/Malvinas war in 1982, with the British military keeping most

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reporters—and television especially—confined to ships and away from the fighting. The U.S. then followed a similar policy in the First Gulf War, restricting reporters to pools which were closely monitored and for the most part kept away from the actual fighting, and also re-imposing censorship, which had not been used in the Vietnam war.

Q. Looking at a recent military campaign, which is still very much in the U.S. and international consciousness, the Iraq war has been compared to Vietnam for a variety of reasons, including the media coverage of the conflicts. Are there similarities between Iraq and Vietnam in the ways in which media coverage shifted during these wars?

The general pattern of US media coverage of the Iraq war was very similar to Vietnam—initially very uncritical, then shifting toward more critical coverage, particularly during the Congressional elections of 2006 when the war was a major issue. There were differences though. Opposition to the war was never treated, as in the case of Vietnam in the early years, as treasonous; there was also much more coverage of civilian casualties and in general of the impact of the war on the civilian population in Iraq, which as to do with the globalization of media (the role of Al Jazeera, for instance) and also the fact that civilians could document and circulate their own experiences using cell phones and the Internet.

Q. Much warfare today is fought “behind the scenes”, often involving the use of what has been described as “light footprint” or “remote” warfare. Some have argued that part of the reason for this trend is war weariness and public opposition to “boots-on-the-ground” deployments, stemming from the failures of Iraq. Do you think that an “Iraq syndrome” has replaced the “Vietnam syndrome”?

I think this is really a continuation of the “Vietnam Syndrome.” After Vietnam, Americans have never been willing to tolerate the level of American casualties that were suffered during the Vietnam war. And due to the globalization of media noted above, policy-makers are also much more concerned about the impact of civilian casualties on world public opinion.

Q. There has been a lot of academic discussion on the potential effect of new information technologies (NITs), such as the internet, on the relationship between the media and the state and the capacity of such technologies to influence policy. Emphasis has been placed on the difficulty of governments and the military to control the flow of information and narratives from alternate (potentially adversarial) sources. Do you think that the rise of NITs has caused a shift in the relationship between the media and the state and had the emancipatory effect on the media that some have suggested?

The rise of NITs has complicated effects, and in some cases, states are able to use them very effectively to influence opinion. But they have disrupted the ability of militaries to control information in some important ways, including the ease with which a variety of actors can document events and circulate information. The Abu Graib scandal, for example, would never have become news if the US soldiers involved had not taken “selfies” of themselves abusing prisoners.

Image credit: Max Pixel/public domain.

Interviewee bio

Daniel C. Hallin is Professor of Communications at the University of California, San Diego. Hallin's research concerns journalism, political communication, and the comparative analysis of media systems. His book *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*, co-authored with Paolo Mancini, has won the Outstanding Book awards of the International Communication and National Communication Associations, and the Goldsmith Book Award of the Shorenstein Center on Press and Politics at Harvard.

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