

William F. Fore
19 Highview Road
Madison, CT 06443

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Dr. George Gerbner
Annenberg School of Communications
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, PA 19104

Dear George,

I saw your Draft on Peacenet, through Bitnet, and then your letter arrived a few days later.

Delivery of the letter was delayed because you still have my former address in New Jersey. Please note the change of address, above. We moved here last year when my teaching at Yale became more permanent. I am Visiting Lecturer in Communication at the Divinity School.

As usual, you are right on target. The need to generate grass roots recognition of the media's role in the discussion of major issues increases daily. Media education and media reform are becoming the highest priority for public action.

Along these lines, I enclose by way of illustration an article I wrote for The Christian Century this week, dealing with television's performance during the Gulf crisis as an illustration of how it distorts issues and suppresses debate all of the time.

Perhaps I can assist CEM. I maintain fairly extensive contacts with the church-related community -- media people, educators, funders. Many of the specific items of action you suggest are right down the line of denominational mission and social action objectives, and, over time, some funding might be secured. And although I am no longer President of the World Association for Christian Communication, I have agreed to serve as a consultant to them in the development of media education in theological seminaries, and am working on a national conference to be held at Yale Divinity School this coming year.

So please count me in, and let me know how I can be helpful. I can be reached through Bitnet/Peacenet -- CDP:WFORE; on NWI as BILL FORE; or telephone 203-245-3938. If all else fails, there is the U.S. mail.

Its good to be in touch with you again!

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Cordially,



William F. Fore

The Military-News Complex
or, Television's War Rhetoric
or, The Shadow War in the Gulf
by William F. Fore
March 28, 1991

A great deal has been written about the influence of television on our culture, but the average American still finds it difficult to understand how it happens, and why. As a result, the impact of TV remains essentially ignored by educators and untouched by public policy.

However, an unusual opportunity to understand the immense cultural power of TV presented itself during the months of the Gulf War, or more accurately, during the media coverage of the Gulf War. For without the coverage it received from the media, that war would have "been" something quite different for the American public, and as result, public opinion and ultimately public policy would also have been different.

Those who study television have identified three basic approaches to analyzing its cultural influence. First, TV can be analyzed for the meanings its images signify. Second, it can be studied for the choices of programming and images as determined by economics. And third, its output can be understood in terms of the ways it gratifies audience needs. If we apply these three approaches to the TV images of the Gulf War, we come up with some interesting insights into television's biases, values and power, and consequently how it affects our culture, not only during periods of stress, but all of the time.

Television as Signifier

TV images signify meaning; the characters, settings and events all mean much more than just the image themselves. The images point to or evoke certain meanings and feelings, and we have come to understand what many of them are. For example, we have learned a complex visual code: a close-up means intimacy or emotion, a shot looking up from below means authority, a fade-out means the end of an episode. We have been taught the "meaning" of certain characters and objects: doctors represent authority, jet planes mean wealth and power, popular actors and athletes are trustworthy. All commercials rely heavily on signification: Pepsi associates its soft drink with youth and beauty; auto manufactures sell us power, control and escape; mouthwash is identified with popularity. Signification is the key to all effective selling.

And what did the Gulf War sell? We were inundated with images of technology: powerful and exotic airplanes taking to the sky night after night; tanks speeding across the desert, stopping only to shoot at (and always hit) a distant target. In case we missed the point, narrators assured us the bombs were "smart" and the strikes "surgical." The signification was clear: technology is success; it not only bestows power and superiority upon the user, but it also enables us to be more humane, even in the conduct of war.

We also saw a great deal of interpretation as opposed to documentation. If Vietnam was the first TV war, then the Gulf was the first anti-TV war, for by and large the cameras were not really there. With the exception of a few exciting moments when a Scud missile was expected in Israel or Dhahran, correspondents were restricted to talking to us by radio or telephone while the camera focused on a map of the Middle East, or else various experts, mostly former military men, explained a particular weapon or tactic from a studio thousands of miles from the battlefield. Never was so much stock footage used to convey so little. When narrators described tank training, we saw familiar shots of tanks racing across the desert; if there was a report of new air sorties, we saw, for the dozenth time, the same old pictures of planes leaving their airfields; and when Patriot missiles were being discussed, we were treated to endlessly repeated footage of Patriots being uncrated (all cleared by the censors).

In sharp contrast with Vietnam, the cameras never, ever, went out with the soldiers into ground combat. Instead, we were interpreted to, day and night, until we were bored silly; we never saw for ourselves. The meaning? That this war was distant, remote, and quite separate from our daily lives. For all our rhetoric, the war was not a truly serious event in most people's lives -- which may have been why some people tried so hard to "sell" the war to others, through yellow ribbons, bumper stickers, and even paid outdoor advertising.

We saw two other kinds of images, but they were far less visible and much less compelling. One was the image of warriors, the soldiers visited by TV in order to bring us "human interest." GI's, somewhat ill at ease, told how they were eager to "get the job done" and go home, while officers assured us their troops were fully prepared for attack. These images signified that there were real people over there -- on our side, that is.

But what about the images of victims? These were even less in evidence. We saw family hardship back home in America, especially "newsworthy" families -- a father taking off from work to care for baby while mother was at war, an award-winning student missing the approval of his father, or families encountering economic loss while the bread-winner was away. But except for scanty and heavily censored shots of the results of Scud raids in Israel and Dhahran, and CNN coverage of the destruction of the celebrated milk factory and the Baghdad bomb shelter, there were none of the compelling images that helped bring the Vietnam conflict into our living rooms. The real victims -- the more than 50,000 Iraqi soldiers who were fried and pulverized by hundreds of thousands of tons of bombs, or the four million civilians in Baghdad experiencing nightly bombing raids and days with no water, food, electricity or sanitation -- were virtually invisible, and their images remain invisible to us today.

Television as Economics

The second way we can study television is through its response to economic pressure. Almost twenty-five years ago the German media analyst Hans Magnus Enzenberger pointed out that all media are manipulated in some way:

"There is no such thing as unmanipulated writing, filming or broadcasting. The question is therefore not whether the media are manipulated, but who manipulates them." (The Consciousness Industry, New York: Seabury, 1974).

In any nation, those in power - social, economic and political -- seek to remain in power. To do so they need control, and one of the most effective control mechanisms is control over what people know, think and believe. In the United States that power rests preeminently with TV, the medium watched far more than any other, the medium which for three decades has been where most people get most of their news and information most of the time. And who controls TV? The web is complex, but there are three groups who exercise most of the control: the media owners who run it, the advertisers who pay for it, and the government which licenses it.

When we analyze television from an economic perspective, we ask one simple question: who benefits? Who benefits when each year the nightly news contains less and less information, and more and more entertainment? Who benefits when the amount of documentaries on the networks decreases each year for twenty years? Who benefits when a single company can own television and radio stations, cable systems and local newspapers -- and thus control much of the information going into a whole community? Who benefits when every candidate for Congress must pay thousands of dollars to the owners of TV stations in order to run for office?

Consider the images of the Gulf War in this context. The celebration of technology takes place on stations increasingly owned and operated by huge multinationals deeply involved in the production of armaments. For example, General Electric, tenth largest corporation in the United States and one of the largest of all weapons producers, owns the NBC network and its stations. Westinghouse, another major defense contractor, owns one of the largest broadcast groups.

And control is not limited to ownership. Sponsors also greatly influence the kind of entertainment that is produced and the way news and information is portrayed. Dupont, IBM, AT&T, and ITT, for example, are all major sponsors on TV and all have major stakes in the public support for the development of high-tech armaments. Who benefits from coverage which celebrates smart bombs and surgical strikes?

Meanwhile, it was no accident that the TV interpreters of the war were predominately Army, Navy and Air Force personnel, plus, of course, the Secretary of Defense, White House and State Department spokespersons, and the President himself. The briefings in Dhahran and Washington were carried live for days, if for no other reason than there was little other "news" available. The networks choose retired officers to interpret what was going on, in part because they were knowledgeable, but also because they represented authority and could be counted upon never to question the idea of the prosecution of the war itself. In addition to this impressive control exercised by owners, sponsors and the military, members of the press were effectively shut off from the war. Malcolm W. Browne, a reporter for The New York Times complained that "(f)or most of the news people most of the time, the gulf war has been played out in the Dhahran International Hotel." He reported that press corps of more

than a thousand had to rely on a pool system which allowed a handful of persons (picked by the United States Armed Forces Joint Information Bureau) to develop the "product" (as the J.I.B. called all forms of news) which would then be used by all other reporters. "In effect," says Browne, "each pool member is an unpaid employee of the Department of Defense, on whose behalf he or she prepares the news of the war for the outer world." (NYT Magazine, March 3, 1991, p. 29). As a result, says Browne, was that "Even in Khafji, this war seemed to smell more of grease-paint than of death." (p. 28)

The economic perspective also asks: who is injured? Who is misled, misinformed, and softly wooed into simple acceptance of the way things are, into believing that things can never be changed -- that, for example, the poor will continue to get poorer and the rich richer, that might should indeed make right, and that wars will always be with us.

Television as Gratifier

A third way to understand TV's power is to consider the psychological gratifications it provides viewers. The war coverage met a number of deep-rooted psychological needs: to feel powerful and in control, to experience extreme emotions in a guilt-free and non-threatening environment, to share emotionally charged experiences with others, to gain a sense of identity, to gain information, to satisfy a belief in justice, to see others make mistakes, to participate in history (vicariously and without risk), and to affirm moral values.

This is perhaps the hardest lesson of all. It reminds us that television would have no power if it did not have viewers willing and eager to consume its messages. While it is true that television seeks out our psychological needs and meets them in ways that achieve its own needs for money, power and control, it is also true that every person who views uncritically is asking to be controlled.

In sum, what does this analysis tell us about television's Gulf War messages? First, that war can be relatively safe, sanitary (surgical), and not terribly costly either in personnel or material. Second, that the key to conducting a "safe" war -- and indeed, to keeping us safe in general -- is high technology which allows us to conduct this kind of war without visiting significant harm on civilians, or even on many of the combatants. Third, that our efforts are pure and in the interest of justice, of righting wrongs, and of maintaining our way of life and standard of living (including a growing dependency on foreign oil). And finally, that we are still Number One, a superpower among all other lesser powers, and consequently have the moral responsibility to police these lesser nations in the interest of peace and justice.

These lessons are the same ones television has brought so persuasively to American citizens during the past four decades through its many variations of that greatest of all American myths, the cowboy: we are the good guys, powerful yet pure, and when bad guys threaten the village, it is up to us, because of our superior moral and physical power, to right the wrongs (of which we are both judge and jury), then leave the scene with our moral and

physical force intact.

So much for community, for nuance, for reality, for compassion. Can such unbelievable egotism and ignorance explain why so many Third World nations envy, fear and hate us all at once? Harland Cleveland recently wrote that the choice between war and peace always seems to come down to the choice between keeping it simple and making it complicated: "if there weren't any simple choices, there would be a lot fewer wars." Television is the device used by the controllers of our culture to keep it simple.

The shadow war in the Gulf -- the battle for public sentiment -- was as important to the world's future as the conflict itself. It was no accident that the military changed the word "giddy" to "proud" in a reporter's description of U.S. pilot's attitudes after a bombing run. It was no accident that when Saddam Hussein threatened to use fuel air bombs last July the press characterized it as another example of the desperate and barbaric lengths to which he would go, but when in February of this year the U.S. began using them against Iraqis in their trenches, the same aerosol bombs had become just another "tool" in the U.S. "tool box." It was no accident that TV never told us that "smart bombs" constituted less than ten percent of those dropped on Iraq, or that it never showed us the "smart bombs" that missed or hit a civilian target. It was no accident that our planes constantly "killed" tanks -- not men. It was no accident that though our President assured us repeatedly that "we have respect for the people of Iraq," we never really saw them or what we did to them.

The biases and distortions of television are not simply a conspiracy on the part of a few media moguls; the responsibility is far too diverse and complex for that. But the system itself, which both reflects and amplifies our culture, makes them inevitable. Our whole society values and desires money, power and prestige. Therefore, though no cabal, it still was no accident that from the first day of our commitment of U.S. troops, until January 3, 1991, TV provided 2,855 minutes of coverage to the Gulf crisis, but only 29 minutes (about one percent) to citizen opposition to the military buildup. (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, 130 W. 25th St., NY NY 10001, Jan 16, 1991)

No, there is no such thing as non-manipulated media, and the owners, sponsors and regulators of American television have a huge stake in our continuing to fund armaments, support huge over-runs in high tech products, maintain an enormous military presence, and initiate a new round of arm sales world-wide. To achieve this, television must constantly massage the minds of the American public with the message of power and the myth of the cowboy. The only difference is that during the Gulf War the message was a little more visible -- at least, let us hope, to those who have eyes that can see.