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DIVERSITY, AUTONOMY AND CONTROL IN NEWS MEDIA COVERAGE OF MODERN WARFARE

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the
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ABSTRACT

The influence of the news media in time of war has been argued about since the Crimean conflict and became a major issue in more recent history over the US withdrawal from the Vietnam War. This thesis seeks to contribute to the debates by exploring the news coverage of incidents in the 2008-2009 Gaza conflict and post-invasion Iraq conflict to determine whether there has been an increase in that influence.

Some analysts see an increase in influence arising out of the rise of the “new” internet-based and digital news media applications, including social networking sites, citizen journalism, dedicated on-line news sites and audience and specialist group news-related sites, and the linkage of these with traditional news outlets. They argue that increased diversity of coverage by an increasingly aggressive, adversarial news media, who have become participant actors in modern conflicts, is symptomatic of this increase in influence. This thesis concludes that there was unprecedented diversity in the coverage of three signal events in these the post-invasion Iraq and the Gaza conflicts and evidence of increased aggression by the news media as adversarial actors. But it did not find that there was substantial enhancement in the autonomy of the news media to the point where they presented a serious challenge to the control of the power holders in society. The evidence suggested that while there has been movement by the news media on a news media autonomy – power holder control continuum, it has to be kept in perspective. Such movement as occurred has been largely countered by the power holders (in these instances the political and military directors) through formal and informal forms of censorship and by adapting or adopting the new news media applications to their own purposes.

This thesis takes a social constructionist approach applying quantitative and qualitative frame analysis in a single study, to the news content concerning the two conflicts, of an international range of multi-platform (print, broadcast and internet-based) news media outlets as revealed by their digital archives. Linking these three types of increasingly inter-woven media, and especially including a variety of internet-based outlets, represents an extension of recent trends in news media content research. This approach raises issues and challenges. But it is necessary given that today large proportions of audiences obtain information on which they base their views and opinions from not one, but several news media platforms. Further research using this approach is urged as is the further development of the approach itself to keep pace with the rapidly evolving “new” news media (formed around bloggers, citizen journalists, the casual “everyperson” reporter and the interpersonal networks), increasingly interacting with or complementing more traditional forms of news media. Implications and lessons raised by this thesis for the principal actors, including suggestions for improving the sometimes difficult military-news media relationship, are also set out.

PREFACE

This thesis has its genesis in the excitement of a four-year-old boy racing around an urban paddock next to his home in suburban Christchurch in 1944 chasing anti-Japanese propaganda pamphlets raining down from a bi-plane chugging along overhead. This, and a wartime army father, sparked an interest in things military from an early age, an interest disappointed on the ground of myopic eyesight. But it was an interest satisfied by the opportunities to write about such things offered by a now 51-year, and continuing, career as a journalist, and a part-time career for half that time as a university student.

Those things military were written about within and between front line journalism over four and a half decades, a lot of that journalism involving court and law reporting, newsroom management, and journalism training work, the latter involvement continuing. Many years of part-time undergraduate study, mainly in history and sociology also enabled the author to maintain an academic interest in things military. But it has been the Centre for Defence and Security Studies at Massey University which has provided the opportunity to pursue that writing interest – through courses on modern military campaigns, joint services operations, terrorism and strategy - with purpose again and eventually to launch this thesis.

It is hoped that this biographical preface will not be taken as some form of self-aggrandisement. It is written with the intention of alerting the reader to the underlying unrecognised biases of the writer or undue emphases which he may have allowed to creep into the following text.

For instance, this thesis is based on an acceptance of the notion that people are presented through the international, multi-platform (print, broadcast and internet-based) news media with multiple and diverse versions of reality of events like the post-invasion Iraq conflict and the Haditha and Blackwater shooting incidents and the Gaza War and the white phosphorous use issue.

Among these “realities” are those which journalists take to be the real story which they present on a daily, hourly and, in today’s digital and cyber news media world, on a minute-by-minute basis about such events. These realities may be quite annoyingly different from those of the soldier involved in an action who later reads a news account of the event which he or she believes is unflattering, distorted or inaccurate. His or her interest at the time of the actual event being reported, is not about a forthcoming news story but in staying alive and keeping their comrades alive in a situation where death may have been a split second away. These news media “realities” may also be annoyingly different from those of the politician or the non-governmental organisation (NGO) director who believe they are doing the right thing according to their lights, only to have their decisions minutely picked away at by a clamorous news media. However these are all “realities” for the audiences which are reflected in the diverse news media coverage.

The objective of this thesis is to help demonstrate that diversity, offer some explanations for it and suggest implications that flow from it in this modern, communications technology-sophisticated, transparent, boundary-porous news media environment.

Hopefully this personalised preface will also help explain the emphasis placed on the bridging of two divides. First it is hoped that the “fish bowl theory,” which the reader will find explained in the Chapter One of this thesis, will help close a long-standing fault line that periodically activates between sociologists and journalists. For example some sociologists maintain from a social constructionist perspective that journalists “manufacture” news. The intention is to make the point that journalists construct reality through the way they write and frame their stories or narratives. Journalists bristle at that suggestion, which for them has a very different and negative connotation impugning their integrity. But the angst is the result of misunderstanding and, possibly on some occasions, a little light-hearted provocation.

The other is the hope for at least the reduction of the gap that sometimes creates friction between journalists who want to tell the whole story as soon as possible – even before it happens if possible – and the soldiers’ concern over possible breaches of operational security (OPSEC) which can cost their lives or the lives of others. While the parties sometimes paranoically doubt the other’s motives in these respects, it is suggested here that the friction could be reduced, through greater understanding about each other’s cultures and practices as well as formal roles and imperatives. It is suggested this could be achieved through close-up, practical training and association for both groups.

Not just training and association for those on the front lines of each vocation. But for the news media editorial personnel who supervise their war reporters or further process their work to produce modified or overall pictures of conflicts. And for the commanders at various levels who plan operations and direct soldiers.

It should be added that the results of this thesis are somewhat sobering for a journalist confident of the influence of the press over so many years, and even at the start of this thesis project. But this exercise has brought the realisation that however the news media in Western democratic societies in particular see themselves as the watch dogs or guard dogs over the powerful, and even as attack dogs able to take substantial bites out of a power holder or two, the powerful usually remain in control even as the pain of those bites subside. The news media autonomy - power holder control continuum, discussed in Chapter Ten, continues to operate.

Christchurch, February, 2011.

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Similarly, this thesis would probably not have been completed without the tolerance and understanding of Dr John Moremon, coordinator of post-graduate theses, and the help and patience given in response to my incessant queries to centre coordinator, Pam Dolman.

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However, one caveat. While I have had all this assistance, any mistakes, misinterpretations or unrecognised biases which the reader finds, are mine alone.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Copyright.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
Preface	iv
Acknowledgements	viii
Table of Contents	x
List of Tables.....	xii
List of Appendices.....	xii
Chapter One: Introduction.....	1
Research questions	4
Research contribution.....	7
Thesis structure by chapter.....	9
Chapter Two: Literature Review	11
Manufacturing reality	13
News media diversity	22
Framing conflicts.....	30
Framing, war coverage and journalism	35
Conclusion.....	40
Chapter Three: Methodology	42
Perspectives on analysing content.....	44
Applying frame analysis.....	46
Devices for frame analysis	48
Crossing news media boundaries	49
Archive validity and reliability.....	55
Cross platform content	58
Research sources	59
Conclusion.....	60
Chapter Four: Method	62
Choice of conflicts.....	63
Choice of incidents	64
Choice of outlets.....	65
Quantitative analysis	69
Table 1: Criteria analysis sample (from Appendix B).....	71
Choice of criteria	72
Framing by criteria	74
Qualitative analysis	77
Establishing the method	78
Keyword selection	79
Archive structure and functioning	82
Content forms	83
Conclusion.....	85
Chapter Five: ‘Reality’ of the Iraq and Gaza conflicts.....	87
Iraq occupation and departure	88
Killings at Haditha.....	90
The Blackwater incident.....	93
War and ‘Willie Pete’ comes to Gaza	96
Conclusion.....	100

Chapter Six: Quantitative framing analysis:	
Result and discussion (Part One).....	102
War coverage and trends	102
Breadth and diversity.....	103
Theatre and incident coverage:	
Iraq conflict theatre coverage	104
Haditha coverage	106
Table 2: Haditha and theatre entries by outlet.....	107
Haditha emphasis.....	108
Blackwater coverage	110
Table 3: Blackwater and theatre entries by outlet	111
Blackwater emphasis	113
Gaza conflict theatre coverage	115
Table 4: White phosphorous and theatre entries by outlet.....	116
White phosphorous coverage	119
White phosphorous emphasis.....	121
Conclusion.....	123
Chapter Six: Quantitative framing analysis:	
Results and discussion (Part Two)	126
Framing the event coverage.....	126
Framing Haditha.....	127
Framing Blackwater	130
Framing white phosphorous	135
Early phase framing.....	135
Later phase framing.....	138
Overall select month framing	139
Conclusion.....	142
Chapter conclusion: Diversity and more	144
Chapter Seven: Qualitative framing analysis:	
Results and discussion	145
Editorial orientations and themes	145
Diversity in framing language and visuals	146
Framing Haditha	153
Haditha themes	160
Framing Blackwater	163
Framing white phosphorous	169
Conclusion.....	174
Chapter Eight: Why the diversity of coverage?	177
Changing war: Media war and legalisation of war.....	178
Synergies of media and legalised war	182
Main actors and the media.....	186
Military and the media.....	186
New and rising news media actors	192
Aggressive news media at war	198
Splintered objectivity.....	203
Conclusion.....	204

Chapter Nine: Implications.....	206
Media war	207
Fractionated public opinion.....	208
Strategic corporals	210
Conflicting imperatives	211
Understanding needed	212
Conclusion.....	217
Chapter Ten: Conclusions	218
Diversity	219
Aggressive, adversarial news media.....	220
Challenging power holders?	222
Extending methodology.....	228
Closing gaps	229
Select bibliography	231

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Criteria analysis sample	71
Table 2: Haditha and theatre entries by outlet.....	107
Table 3: Blackwater and theatre entries by outlet	111
Table 4: White phosphorous and theatre entries by outlet	116

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A: Outlet archives: Theatre and incident coverage by month	244
Appendix B: Outlet archives – Haditha articles by framing criteria for baseline months	268
Appendix C: Outlet archives – Blackwater articles by framing criteria for baseline months	277
Appendix D: Outlet archives – White phosphorous articles by framing criteria for baseline months	286
Appendix E: Main outlet digital archives accessed	298