A War Correspondent's First Duty is Patriotism

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The statement, “A war correspondent’s first duty is patriotism”, implies that a war correspondent’s job is primarily to report information that rallies the public’s support for its nation’s war endeavors. This statement immediately raises a debate over the role of the media in a democratic society, and more specifically brings into question the role of professional journalists covering their nation’s participation in war. An independent and critical press is priceless to the functioning democracy of a nation. Interwoven in the ethics of professional journalism are ideals of “responsibility”, “objectivity”, and “truth”, which are supposed to distinguish the media as a credible source of information for the public. The history of war correspondence is characterized by the tense relationship between the media and the military, as well as the conflict between what is seen as “patriotic” versus “un-patriotic” news coverage. Because of the continual reshaping of war itself, as well as the changing rapport between state and press as media has developed, the nature of war reporting has evolved in the last two centuries. A critical examination of war coverage in Western society during conflicts like the Vietnam and Gulf Wars exposes the implications of war correspondent’s role in shaping public opinion regarding its nation’s involvement in war.

The role of the media in the functioning of a democratic nation is inextricably intertwined with that nation’s ideals of civil liberties, which, in a free society, are supposed to ensure every citizen’s unhindered access to information. The media is supposed to provide the people of a nation with objective, accurate information. This reporting of news in turn shapes the populous’ judgments regarding the policies their elected representatives enact, such as the decision to go to war. The notion that citizens in a free society are entitled to “freedom of information”, and thus a free press, is critical to the credibility of democratic institutions that are established by the people to protect the people and their national interests. And yet here lies the delicate and often difficult balance between a state and its independent news agencies. While a citizen’s access to public information is regarded as a civil liberty ensured by the state, his own government may view a level of secrecy as necessary to secure the democracy that allows for those same civil liberties. This tension is especially heightened during times of war. Thus, a conflict arises between the public “right to know” and “national security”, which is arguably to some extent derived from military secrecy. The clash between public opinion and the government’s reaction to public opinion is the lifeblood of liberal democracy, and the role of the media in contributing to a healthy public discourse must be appreciated. More specifically, the role of the war correspondent as the public’s “watchdog” over a nation’s military efforts is crucial to the functioning of a free society.

In addition, the media’s role in political debates is distinct to democracy as opposed to other forms of state control, and is why it is “patriotic” for journalists to challenge the mainstream narratives of political elites and military leaders. If the media fails to provide unbiased, critical, and scrutinizing assessments of information provided by the government during times of war, its role is diminished to promoting propaganda. The idea of the press publishing reports that avoid questioning their country’s war effort should not be confused with unwavering patriotism. Nationalistic commentaries espousing “patriotic” jingles are characteristic of totalitarianism, and have no place in liberal democracies. Ideally, “patriotism” in democratic societies obliges citizens and journalists to embrace the Socratic tradition of critically questioning the actions of their government. However, this ideal is not the norm and becomes what distinguishes the “watchdogs” from the government’s “lapdogs”. In reference to the media’s tendency to stray, Daya Kishan Thussu and Des Freedman write, “Mainstream media reproduce the framework of political and military leaders and in doing so provide propaganda rather than “disinterested” journalism.” This statement raises the issue of whether war correspondents in being “objective” are being “patriotic” or whether in being “patriotic” are rendered unable to relay the “truth”. Specifically, the identity of a war correspondent is rooted in

the idea of impartial "objectivity" aimed at reaching the "truth", yet in communicating their interpretations they may adopt a "patriotic" posture. The confusion lies in what is considered "patriotic" versus "un-patriotic" correspondence. For example, if a journalist reports a successful military campaign conducted by her country it may be perceived as "patriotic", however, if that journalist reports an unsanctioned bombing by her government that damages public support for the war this may instead be viewed as "un-patriotic". Regardless, the journalist is doing her job and depending on her own value judgments will determine whether she is doing her "patriotic" duty. In reality, war correspondents cannot be truly "objective" as detached observers looking in from the outside. Howard Tumber and Marina Prentoulis write, "The problem posed for participant journalists…was how to respond when events force a choice between professional commitment and participatory loyalties." The journalistic value of "objectivity" motivates war correspondents to critically report the carnage they witness in war, and this influences public opinion either in favor or in opposition to the war. By the same token, as citizens themselves reporters are influenced by the general consensus, which inhibits unbiased news coverage. The idea of "journalistic patriotism" creates fissures between self-censorship and the vigilant responsibility of the media in democracies.

The history of war corresponding is laced with the idea of "patriotism" as a responsibility, which may run counter to ideas of integrity within journalism as a profession. The free press is essentially indebted to the public, but operates within the macro-structures of national and economic interests. Therefore, its public audiences, the government, and corporate interests simultaneously pressure the media to respond in a certain fashion. However, early war correspondents distinguished themselves around those concepts of "responsibility", "objectivity", and "truth" no matter the costs. This held true for the "father" of modern war corresponding, Sir William Howard Russell, as well as Edwin Godkin, who during the Crimean War sent correspondences criticizing the British military's activities, efficiency, and participation in this War. Their reports affected the public's perception of the War, yet also led the military to re-evaluate its approach and the conditions of its forces. Gen. Peter Gration writes, "…. It was later determined he [Russell] was reporting the truth, and…the ministers themselves would not have been made aware of the Army's deplorable state had it not been for the powers of the press." This highlights the indispensable role of the media. Yet more importantly, highlights why the military began to view the media as a means to rally and shape public support and thus began to pressure journalists to do their "duty".

Subsequently, in the First and Second World Wars, war correspondent's pumped out "patriotic" dispatches. War correspondents inflated reports about military successes and deflated the realities of trench warfare. Gen. Gration writes:

By the start of the First World War, the British had learnt that the press was indeed a powerful tool and used it to boost popular support for the war effort and…During the Second World War the media…did nothing to swing popular support from the efforts at the battlefront.

If the road to hell is paved with good intentions, then at this time war correspondents were on that path. War correspondents are not supposed to promote propaganda that feeds into the continuation of global conflicts, yet reporters have the same fears and anger as regular citizens and may forget their necessary role in reporting objectively the brutal conditions of war. The meat grinding effects of trench warfare were not initially realized by the public, and government officials had no incentive to pressure generals to change their tactics. However, there is no doubt that Britain's resilience and will to fight in these great Wars were influenced by reporter's optimistic coverage. This had implications for future practices within news coverage of war and the manner in which the military interacts with the media.

Furthermore, the military's relationship with the media's coverage creates conflicts between the state and war correspondents who refuse to succumb to state ideas of 'patriotism'. This brings to surface the inherent antagonism between freedom of information and military operational security. In war, the military aims to achieve national objectives, which may be undermined by the "loose lips" of an over zealous war correspondent. For example, during the Falklands conflict of 1982, the release of information on the plans for an attack compromised the lives of British troops and stepped outside of the boundaries of proper war coverage. At the same time, the military often views the media as a mechanism to manipulate information, an invaluable tool as national support of the war effort is believed to be vital to victory. However, the fundamental ethics of journalism and its almost elemental role in democracy

behooves journalists to resist reporting every word from a general's mouth at face value. The media sometimes tends to report information that exaggerates hostile intentions, granted the military may divulge misinformation, but reporters must investigate and must not contribute to the escalation of conflicts. Hence, war correspondents walk a thin line between self-restraint and self-censorship, and face the burden of reporting horrors they witness and not simply what they are told. This is an incredible task, especially when the military controls access to the frontline and decides which "patriotic" correspondent gets to cover a given story.

Media coverage of the Vietnam War serves as an example of the interactions between the media and the military and the impact of the media on public opinion. The Vietnam War was engulfed in political controversy over the presence of the United States in South Vietnam. At first, support for the war was enthusiastic and optimistic, but as the war dragged on and images of the horrors of war were beamed into the living rooms across America, morale eroded. Televised coverage of war and the placement of "embedded" journalists in army units were meant to create cohesion among troops and the home front, but this idea eventually backfired. Daniel C. Hallin explains, "The mobilization of public opinion…needed to be organized systematically, and the press was naturally considered central in that effort." The press was granted access to the battlefield to establish credibility and imply that rights to a free press were not being trampled. However, reporters were expected to follow strict military guidelines at their discretion, which requires the correspondent to make value judgments and observe from a "patriotic" point of view.' The military's concerns over media degrading popular support caused it to impose some restrictions, yet the media continued to report the "truth" and the "truth" was that war is hell.

The media coverage of Vietnam was characterized by both the ability of war correspondents to change public opinion, and challenged perceptions of the media's role. Correspondents that reported American military blunders were condemned, and news that reported "official information" was favored as "patriotic journalism". Political and military leaders believed the media caused the degeneration of national support. Carlyle A. Thayer writes, "…. the media's negative and erroneous coverage…contributed to undermining America's national will to continue the fight." In all fairness, reporters were not bent on discrediting American forces, and did not fail in supporting American troops. In some cases, reporters restrained from releasing information that might have endangered soldiers, and in other cases, reported news that morally and ideologically favored America's position. William M. Hammond writes, "Since whatever they said or wrote could be made to serve one agenda or another, they had altered the war by their very presence, becoming as much a part of it as any soldier in the field." The bulk of the information reported came from official military sources, and war correspondents did their "duty" of reporting the physical, emotional, and psychological costs of war. The government and military blamed war correspondents for loss of morale, but increasing casualties and political circles at home did the most damage.

Moreover, in reaction to the effects of war correspondence in Vietnam, the Gulf War of 1991 is a further example the military's attempts to manage "journalistic patriotism" at the expense of journalism's professional integrity. During the Gulf War correspondents continued to attempt to critically assess the experiences of war, but the military had plans to achieve their objectives with as little interference from the media as possible. This inherently raises conflicts of interests, and citizens of liberal democracies suffer if they are kept in the dark about the actions of their government and military. Fred Halliday proposes that war correspondents did not report unsavory news because they feared being criticized as "un-patriotic" and states, "In fulfilling a responsibility to provide news, and to avoid undermining a country's war effort, other responsibilities, including those to educate the public in the broader issues, were neglected." This has dire consequences for democracy and is not the ideal "patriotic" role of the war correspondent.

Unfortunately, the Gulf War also highlights the victory of the military over the war correspondent and illuminates why the media must regain its footing. Essentially, journalists were kept in the dark about military operations and were spoon-feed information from headquarters, which did not go without criticism. Col. David H. Hackworth states:

All this is good for security, good for the policymakers but bad for freedom and bad for democracy, and it is also bad for those young soldiers, sailors and airmen who were out there fighting for freedom which included the muzzled press corps' right to tell their story.

The war correspondents "patriotic duty" is to continue to expose the "truth" that encourages public discourse and

invigorates debate about the legitimacy of war. If the first casualty of war is truth, it is the role of the war correspondent to find it and bring it back to life. The Gulf War in the eyes of many journalists can be seen as a tragedy in war reporting and a triumph in terms of the military's pursuit of national support at the expense of the public's civil liberties. Either way, depending on the point of view of the spectator, war correspondence is a determinate of public opinion and its role will remain pertinent to the health of a vibrant and free society.

In conclusion, the statement discussed here may imply that it is virtuous for the war correspondent to publish news that strictly promotes national support behind the government in times of war. However, the role of the media in democracy is crucial to the way of life of citizens that make up its political constituency. Because of this, war correspondents must stick to ideas of "responsibility", "objectivity", and "truth" in order to ensure that the public and democratic institutions remain aware of the wider issues involved. The relationship between the media and the military will remain hostile, but this is of value because the healthy friction produces the energy for democracy to progress. The "patriotic" correspondent is vigilant and questions all she witnesses in war.

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