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War and media since 9/11

Romy Fröhlich (ed.)

Media in War and Armed Conflict: The Dynamics of Conflict News and Dissemination, Routledge: Abingdon, 2018; 354 pp.: £110. ISBN: 9781138051621 (hbk)

Lindsay Palmer

Becoming the Story: War Correspondents since 9/11, University of Illinois Press: Chicago, IL, 2018; 202 pp.: \$22.95. ISBN: 9780252083211 (pbk)

Reviewed by: Piers Robinson, *Organisation for Propaganda Studies, UK*

Overview: War and conflict post 9/11

The occurrence of war and armed conflict in the international system has not abated. For a brief period following the collapse of the Soviet Union, many Western academics celebrated the emergence of a new world order and looked positively towards a more democratic, rule-governed and peaceful international system (e.g. Fukuyama, 1989). The use of force, rather than for territorial gain and self-interest, would instead be deployed in order to protect civilians and uphold human rights by way of a new norm ‘humanitarian intervention’ (e.g. Shaw, 1996). Since 9/11, however, we have witnessed a series of major conflicts in the international system many of which have occurred under the auspices of the so-called ‘war on terror’. Both Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) were the target for US-led military action and resulted in violent conflict that continues to this day. Later, but not entirely disconnected from the early phase of the ‘war on terror’, came US-sponsored action in both Libya and Syria. Although at face value part of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ uprisings, both of these countries had also been targeted by Western states (e.g. the United States, France and the United Kingdom) who have worked with regional allies (e.g. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Qatar) in order to fund and support proxy forces fighting to overthrow both governments. In both these countries, this has led to the US and some of its European and Middle Eastern allies to variously provide direct or indirect support for Al Qaeda and jihadist linked groups (see Anderson, 2019; Curtis, 2018; Ripley, 2018). For example, US involvement in Syria has involved the largest ever covert CIA operation (Timber Sycamore) in co-operation with Saudi Arabia (Mazzetti et al., 2017). In Syria, Russia and Iran have supported the Syrian government against these attacks.

The death toll associated with all the post-9/11 wars has almost undoubtedly run into the millions. It is highly unlikely that this almost constant state of war has been coincidental: retired US general Wesley Clark and former chief of staff to Colin Powell Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson (2019) have both publicly stated the existence of plans to engage in multiple ‘regime-change wars’ following 9/11 while the UK Chilcot report published documents which provided corroboration of these claims (Robinson, 2017). ‘Regime

change' tactics continue today with drives to weaken, destabilize and topple governments in Iran and Venezuela, conflict between the West and Russia over the Ukraine, while substantial questions continue to emerge with respect to the actors involved in the 9/11 attacks (e.g. Griffin and Woodworth, 2018; Robinson, 2019a). The drum beat of war has yet to crystallize with respect to the Russian Federation or China, but there is clearly a concerted drive to attribute responsibility for international insecurity, violence and mischief at the feet of Russia (see Boyd-Barrett, 2019) even though its military engagements are minor relative to the Western propensity for 'humanitarian intervention' and 'regime change'. We live in violent times.

Against this backdrop of Western-fueled armed conflict and propaganda, Fröhlich's *Media in War and Armed Conflict* and Palmer's *War Correspondents since 9/11* raise a familiar but important set of issues regarding the role of media during war.

Media-political dynamics during war and conflict: Fröhlich's INFOCORE project

Fröhlich's edited collection represents the primary output of a large-scale EU-funded research project, INFOCORE, which drew together a significant body of researchers in order to explore media dynamics across five different conflicts in Syria, Israel-Palestine, Burundi, Macedonia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and which included analysis of British, French and German news media coverage. The result is a rich and sophisticated range of analyses, drawing upon rigorous methodologies and portraying a complex and nuanced understanding of media-political dynamics during war. At times the analysis tends towards a suggestion that media-political dynamics are highly variable during conflict with governments and powerful actors never fully able to control the narrative and journalists retaining significant levels of autonomy (Baden and Meyer, p. 19). For example, in a chapter documenting INFOCORE's impressive media analysis (based on a sophisticated content and framing analysis of a large corpus of media coverage), Baden and Tenenboim-Weinblatt (p. 53) note that their data show that 'there are also many valuable transformations suitable to mitigate the distortions and incitements of other conflict actors, and improve the quality of information' and that there is a 'powerful undercurrent of professional news work that is relatively unaffected by conflict-related or political biases' (p. 53). In the concluding chapter, Fröhlich at times appears to lean even harder towards a conclusion that is suggestive of media autonomy noting that common assumptions regarding government influence over media reporting have been 'put into question by our results' (p. 291).

At the same time, the broad thrust of the various chapters points towards the long-standing and well-documented thesis that governments and powerful actors hold tremendous sway over journalists and the media during times of conflict and war and that journalistic conventions and news routines further inhibit the quality of war reporting. For example, Baden and Tenenboim-Weinblatt also find that news media coverage across all their cases showed 'markedly ethnocentric presentation of the news' (p. 59), the 'incendiary nature of conflict news' (p. 59) and that there is 'plenty of evidence to corroborate common worries about the fallible, biased, violence-orientated and

self-righteous coverage of conflict' (p. 68). The subsequent and key chapter authored by Fröhlich and Jungblut makes a welcome contribution by placing the 'strategic communication' activities of state actors and NGOs under the spotlight. Activities today labelled with euphemisms such as 'strategic communication' or 'public relations' were historically referred to as 'propaganda' (Bakir et al., 2018). Much of the political communication literature tends to sidestep analysis of message production and promotion by political actors, preferring instead to focus on media production and content or audience reception/public opinion (Robinson, 2019b). INFOCOR's focus on this frequently ignored but critical part of the media-political equation is therefore much to be applauded. Consistent with the preceding chapter's media analysis, Fröhlich and Jungblut discover interesting variations in how political actors and NGOs variously promote conflict escalation and de-escalation. However, their overall conclusions are fairly clear and arguably damning with regard to the way states and even NGOs promote violent conflict.

The fact that not only the strategic persuasive communication of NGOs but surprisingly also that of the particular political decision makers of this study generally places a higher focus on escalative narratives . . . puts the de-escalative attitude of European politics/political institutions – often postulated from a normative point of view – to the test. (Fröhlich and Jungblut, 2018: 103)

They continue to posit, with great care, that their findings regarding both media and 'strategic communication' outputs indicate both that NGOs tend to promote a 'humanitarian intervention' agenda while 'strategic narratives successfully make it into the media coverage and, once there, within particular professional journalistic routines probably contribute to the general "consonance of escalation" – as we put it – in media coverage on war and armed conflict' (Fröhlich and Jungblut, 2018: 104).

Other chapters, by and large, support these arguments. Berganza, Herrero-Jimnez and Carratala's chapter looks closely at the case of parliamentary debates over whether to attack Syria following the alleged chemical weapon attack in Ghouta, Syria, in 2013. Their aim is to explore the influence of media (social and news media) upon parliamentary debates at the time and particular emphasis is placed on exploring the importance of social media/citizen journalism including from activists on the ground in Syria. Although they find important interactions between parliamentarians and social media, they also note the almost complete absence of genuine counter-narratives:

One matter that proved especially interesting was the absence of Russian media from the European parliamentary debates . . . the Russian press offered a completely different perspective to the one adopted by the countries of Western Europe and the US, both with respect to the authorship and dimensions of the Ghouta massacre. (pp. 129–131)

This issue is particularly pertinent because the issue of alleged chemical weapon attacks in Syria remains disputed at an international level and is now subject to emerging evidence that opposition groups have been staging attacks, so-called false flags, in order to implicate the Syrian government (Chen et al., in press; McKeigue et al., 2019). In effect, debate over the alleged chemical weapon attack at Ghouta remained firmly within the contours of what Hallin (1986) once described as 'elite-legitimated controversy'

whereby Syrian government guilt was presumed and arguments then proceeded around how to respond. Usefully, and in a particularly interesting chapter, Hanitzsch and Hoxha explore the contextual factors, such as limited access to information, reliance upon financial support from Western governments and NGOs and physical threats to journalists, which cause journalists to struggle to retain their autonomy (p. 187). Further chapters by Sangar, Meyer, Wolfsfeld, Tsiforni, Micevski, Trpevska, Frere and Fiedler add further methodological and empirical depth variously discussing role of NGOs as supplier of information, interviews with political actors and audience trust in media.

The risks and dangers of covering war: Palmer's analysis of the post-9/11 war correspondent

Evidence of media inadequacy and failure is further documented in Palmer's *War Correspondents since 9/11* which offers a focused discussion, based on interviews and critical discourse analysis, about a series of examples in which journalists have themselves become victims of war. Specifically, Palmer looks at the murder of Richard Pearl by Al Qaeda associated terrorists, the injuring of the US military-embedded journalist Bob Woodruff in Iraq, the expulsion of Maziar Bahari and Nazila Fathi from Iran, the sexual assault of Lara Logan during 2011 protests in Egypt and the death of Marie Colvin in Syria. The work offers a useful counterweight to the aggregate-level and data-rich analysis provided by Fröhlich's *INFOCORE* and helps to flesh out some of the key constraints and problems facing journalists during the post-9/11 wars, including pressures that emerge from both the media industry and the censorship and propaganda emanating from governments. The major concern running through the book is that economic pressures and technological advances have placed great pressures on journalists and have had deleterious effects upon both their safety and the quality of their reporting. The work also evidences multiple examples of media failure with respect to the reporting of war.

The analysis throughout is rich and thoughtful and also succeeds in placing in context the events surrounding each of the journalists that are focused on. For example, while documenting the terrifying impact the beheading of US journalist Daniel Pearl had on the news industry, Palmer also notes that his status as a *Wall Street Journal* reporter was used to bolster the 'news outlets' "war on terror" narrative' (p. 48) while, at the same time, 'the deaths of Afghan and Iraqi journalists at the hands of the US military were not' reported on (p. 47). Regarding the injuring of Woodruff in Iraq, Palmer highlights the way in which the Pentagon's strategy of embedding journalists with military units, whatever its rhetoric regarding the protection of journalists, was underpinned by flagrant violations of norms involving 'the hypocritical (and illegal) targeting of unilateral journalists as a silencing strategy that the Pentagon exacted upon those who did not play by the rules' (p. 75). Palmer writes:

The [US military] attack on the Al Jazeera headquarters, alongside the murder of unilaterals like Terry Lloyd, flouted the Geneva conventions protecting journalists in wartime, no matter how 'accidental' the Pentagon claimed them to be. This created a profoundly precarious environment for conflict correspondents covering the 2003 invasion of Iraq as well as the insurgency that followed. (p. 75)

Palmer also astutely observes the way in which the Woodruff case highlights the ethnocentrism of English-language news organizations through their propensity to place Western reporters centre frame while ‘representing them as the heroes of melodrama’ (p. 75). The result of this was that, rather than asking tough questions, networks were ‘aligning themselves with the military men and women whose presence in Iraq had outlasted all of the original predictions’ (pp. 75–76). Such questions, although not specified by Palmer, have included the issue of government deception over the alleged Iraqi WMD that were never found and the human consequences of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. In simple terms, the two issues that should have focused journalistic scrutiny, the justification for invading Iraq and the scale of human catastrophe that followed, were replaced by stories about one heroic war correspondent.

Issues related to the prejudice and discrimination of Western media organizations are further highlighted in the chapters on Bahari and Fathi and Logan. Regarding the former, while white Western journalists receive the lion’s share of ‘proactive and reactive assistance with safety’, the industry ‘does not ethically recognize the value – indeed, the humanity – of its locally based employees’ (p. 104). Also, in Bahari’s case, news outlets ‘emphasized his western identity while subtly jettisoning his Iranian identity’ (p. 104). Regarding the sexual assault of Logan during the 2011 uprisings in Egypt, Palmer again notes the industry imperative towards ‘lucrative melodrama’ which emphasized ‘neoliberal tenets of self-sufficiency and individual responsibility’ while simultaneously using ‘Logan’s experience as a launch pad for an incredibly Islamophobic representation of the Egyptian activists’ (p. 130).

The most provocative critique comes with Palmer’s analysis of the death of Marie Colvin while effectively embedded with opposition groups in Syria. Although now being lauded in some quarters as the epitome of the courageous war correspondent and a symbol of the so-called Syrian ‘democratic revolution’, Palmer’s analysis is more circumspect. For example, Palmer notes that there is doubt over whether Colvin actually witnessed firsthand the death of Syrian baby (Baba Amr) even though ‘three major English-language networks interviewed Colvin as if she were their own eyewitnesses in the field’ (p. 133) while the promotion of Colvin as a ‘valiant witness’ elided much of the reality of the war in Syria. For example, immediately following her death Palmer notes how CNN ‘focused heavily on the apparently ahistorical evil of the Assad regime, glossing over any tough questions about the international politics that may have contributed to the war in Syria’ (p. 152). Palmer also makes clear the inadequacy of Colvin’s reporting on the Syrian war arguing that the focus on Baba Amr was a simplistic ‘rhetorical maneuver’ when ‘viewing the conflict on a larger scale failing to ‘discuss the international proxy war that was unfolding in Syria’ (p. 154). She writes: ‘Colvin herself was also aligned with western political sentiments in this report . . . Rather than serving as an objective eyewitness, then, in death, Colvin was linked to a very distinct political perspective’ (pp. 154 and 157). Consistent with INFOCORE’s data, we see here the blending of partisan reporting with an interventionist, allegedly ‘humanitarian’ thrust in reporting.

Overall, ultimately, Palmer persuasively documents the inadequacy of industry security concerns, the ways in which the safety of journalists (primarily Western) has been jeopardized during the post-9/11 wars, and the commercial and technological imperatives that heighten the risks to journalists. This combines with the simplistic and

self-serving propensity of journalists, editors and producers to generate feel-good hero stories which glamorize and sensationalize journalists. At the end of the day, this seems to result in the continued propensity of corporate media organizations to promote war or, as Fröhlich's INFOCORE puts it, to disseminate 'escalative narratives' (p. 103).

Conclusion: The need to grapple with the bigger picture of media failure in wartime

Both works are commendable, rigorously researched and important contributions to the literature on war and media. In their divergent methodological approaches to the topic, they combine to offer rich and important insights to the role and performance of media in wartime. Both point towards a broader and critical bigger picture which perhaps needs stating more clearly than the authors' rather cautious approaches allow for. Indeed, if there is a criticism of these works, it is that they seem hesitant to fully address the media failures that their works point towards. In part, this is perhaps because of the particular foci of the works: the case selection for Fröhlich's work arguably avoids the more substantial conflicts we have seen post 9/11 and this might have led to an over-reading of levels of autonomy and independence; Palmer's work chooses, ultimately, to focus on Western corporate journalists and the risks they face rather than the numerous non-Western journalists who have suffered and died in the post-9/11 wars. Palmer is also keen to emphasize journalists are not fully responsible for the coverage they generate. To this reviewer, it appears there is a hesitancy to criticize more fully the serious problems that their analyses point towards which is that for a variety of interlocking reasons, corporate and mainstream media continue to perform extremely badly when it comes to the reporting of war. Conflicts are simplified beyond recognition, Western war reporters are hero-worshipped and journalists repeatedly fail to maintain sufficient critical distance from those who actively promote war, whether they are governments, pro 'humanitarian intervention' NGOs or actors linked with belligerents within war zones. This is not to say there is no variability or exceptions and the sensitive methodologies utilized by the researchers succeed in detecting these. But it is to say that the body of empirical evidence, which these works make an important contribution to, continues to demonstrate the tendency, arguably overwhelming, of corporate media actively promoting violent conflict.

If this is indeed the big story regarding media reportage during the post-9/11 wars, we have a very big problem. The wars instigated and fueled by Western governments and their regional allies have killed and injured millions of people. And there is a case to be made that the continued belligerent stance adopted by the US/NATO and its regional allies runs the real risk of violent and catastrophic military confrontation with Russia or China. The ethical question is the extent to which media organizations should be held to account for all of these well-documented failings. In general media 'professionals' have been reluctant to accept or even tolerate such criticisms, so perhaps it is time to lay down the gauntlet and subject 'professional' journalism to inquiry, investigation and accountability with respect to their reporting of war.

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