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Embedded Journalism

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Embedded journalism

1. Defining embedded journalism

Embedded journalism refers to the increasingly common practice of having journalists join military units during times of war. In military parlance, it refers to media representatives who remain with a military unit for an extended period of time, typically several months, as opposed to only one or a few days. While the term is used today to refer to journalists who join military units from any country, it originated with the United States and Britain, as these were the first two countries to embed journalists during the 2003 war with Iraq.

While journalists had operated alongside military units prior to the 2003 war with Iraq, they had never done so in such numbers and in such an organized manner, offering first-hand and up-close accounts of combat operations that were not available to unembedded journalists. These latter journalists are also known as unilaterals. Since that time, journalists have been embedded with military units in several other conflicts, most notably during the war in Afghanistan.

Embedded journalists, who are not themselves armed, operate as non-fighting members of the military units to which they are assigned, living, traveling, and going into battle with them, much like traditional military press officers do. Embedded journalism thus also refers to a new and more intimate kind of relationship between the military and the news media; one characterized by close cooperation and a mutual recognition of their respective needs. More specifically, it represents a recognition of the fact that, while the military needs to retain some control over what is disseminated to the public about an ongoing war, journalists need more direct and sustained access to military actions to carry out their professional duties.

2. Embedded journalism’s historical roots

The current practice of embedding journalists with military units during times of war can be understood as a reaction, on the part of the US military, to military–news media relations since the Vietnam War (1955–75) and, more specifically, to the US military’s inability to control journalists’ dispatches from that war.