

Victims of War or Victims of the Media?

Headlines that read "The Face of War" (*The Star*, 02/04/03, p. 1), "Civilians Slaughtered" (*The Citizen*, 02/04/03, p. 6), "The Dead, the Dying and the Damaged" (*Mail & Guardian*, 28/03/03–03/04/03, p1), "Mens is die Nuwe Wapen" (*Beeld*, 31/03/03), and images that display dead, tortured, bloodied, crying, emotionally distraught, war torn people in Iraq are the order of the day, it seems, in the South African news media's coverage of the conflict in Iraq. As the conflict in Iraq reaches new stages similarly so does the coverage as provided by the news media. Increasingly newspapers are carrying more and more graphic images of dead bodies and injured people. Has the media gone overboard in its mission to show us "the face of war"?

The Star (02/04/03 p1) on its front page emblazons the disturbing image of a bloodied, dead corpse of a child. The half-page sized image is a close up shot of the child who is clearly identifiable in the image. Readers can see the graphic detail of the small body wrapped in bloodied rags. This shot of the child lying against the body of its mother (who is unidentifiable), still with its pacifier around its neck, clearly disturbs one's sense of morality and ethics. It may be argued that the sight might not have been so horrific had the photographer not shown the face of the child. The horror of the image is made even more graphic with the subheading, "Horror of Infant Corpses shocks Red Cross". No justification for using the image is provided and the question as to the real value of using the image needs to be asked. Presumably it is used to show the horror of war. There is another issue however.

It seems a bitter irony that directly below this report *The Star* (02/04/03) features a positive story on the children of the St Mary's Junior School in Johannesburg. The children are shown praying for the plight of the children in Iraq. In the article children are asked how they feel about the war and especially their concerns for the children that have become victims in the conflict. It is interesting to note that one of the sources in the story comments on the "powerlessness" the children from this school feel about the situation. The fact that they can do nothing to better the situation of other children is worrying and does on some level indicate the enormous defencelessness, powerlessness, as well as incapacity of Iraqi children to defend themselves against being photographed and filmed. The positive intentions of the children's prayer story are clear and their prayers are an attempt at expressing support for other children but any positive value of the story must however be severely undermined through use of the graphic image above. A child either from the school featured, or any other who happened to pass by a news-stand would have been exposed to the same horror about which they feel so powerless. Although the child was an Iraqi and in another country, children don't see borders they simply see another child.

Die Beeld (31/03/03) it seems forewarned readers that such images are on the increase when it included an image of an Iraqi child hurt, bloodied and crying, in the hands of coalition military medical staff. The question that arises is what value these and other images have for the reader. Is it not a certain fact of war that innocent civilians get hurt in conflict situations? It may suggest to readers the concern shown by coalition forces with regard to the health and well-being of civilians in Iraq.

In another article, in *The Citizen* (02/04/03 p6), an Iraqi man is standing over a coffin with three human bodies inside. This article is unusual in that the Iraqi man is identified and thus given a voice. In many cases dead bodies are photographed to show the readers the destructiveness of war, yet the people in them are seldom identified. This omission merely contributes to the dehumanisation of the civilians shown.

More and more "the business" of war comes to the forefront when seeing these pictures. It is clear that these kinds of images focus on the macabre, and that like an accident next to the road, spectators want to see and have a glimpse at the spectacle, it may well be that newspapers sell more copies using these images. If this is indeed the case can their use be justified? There have been extensive debates about "embedded" journalists and biased values of the media in reporting the war. The question that now needs to be asked is what are the reasons and justifications for using particularly graphic images? At what point are they too graphic? Should the horrors of war being experienced by children in Iraq be visited on children in South Africa? The media is in a difficult position as there is no clear answer but some balance is required of the rights of the media to show the war in its horror against the rights of those they choose to show. The MMP urges media to err on the side of the rights of those involved.

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