

## **And That's the Way It Is: The Media's Role in Ending the Vietnam War**

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**Abstract:** The Vietnam War, also known as “The Living Room War,” was the first major American conflict to be so honestly documented by the media, as previous war correspondence focused mainly on the positive aspects of the war to keep morale up on home soil. However, with the advent of television and the American citizens' growing need for the truth, the media developed into an entity that no longer delivered second-hand messages, but instead sought its own information, thereby leading to the American people's loss of faith in their government and the war it so strongly believed in.

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## **Introduction**

Knowing the truth has the ability to set one free, and unfortunately in today's media reports, it is difficult to differentiate between those reports that are trustworthy and those which are not. However, the Vietnam War was a very different story. This war, or conflict as it was commonly referred to, was an insightful period for both the journalists covering the war and the American citizens seeking answers. Civilians felt they could trust the media amidst a war that lacked definition, and as the conflict escalated and it became clear that their government was misleading them, civilians turned to the media to tell them the truth. The Vietnam War was a turning point in the management of war reports, and this paper will explore how the media was a tool of communication for the masses and the media's role in the eventual end of the war. In order to explore this topic, it is important first to examine the style of journalism in the three major wars that preceded the Vietnam War and the early Vietnam War reporting which the American government attempted to censor. This examination will be followed by a description of factors and key events that lead to a significant shift in the journalistic tone. Finally, the repercussions of the reports from Vietnam will be discussed by examining how they contributed to mass outcries from a large number of Americans. The media has the power to move people, and the following will demonstrate that, through its presentation of information, the media moved them to say "no" to the Vietnam War.

## **War Journalism Prior to Vietnam**

The early days of journalism during the Vietnam War were positive and upbeat, and reports showed support for the American troops who were bravely giving their lives to fight communism. This attitude stemmed from the journalistic style that had been used in the preceding American wars of the twentieth century and also from sheer patriotic support for the United States (Hallin, 1986, p. 9). During the First World War, the media was largely represented by photography, and press photography became a new means of sharing war details with civilians. However, The Press Bureau censored reports, and it was not until a year into the war that photographers were allowed into battle areas to capture images. War photography then became an official aspect of combat journalism, even though images were highly censored (Imperial War Museum, n.d., First World War Technologies section). Many Hollywood films set during the Second World War commonly include a scene of movie-goers

being treated to a pre-show news reel that showed the public how their boys defeated the enemy and still managed to smile positively for the camera. This no doubt had an impact on those watching and gave them a sense of safety and pride, which was the intention of the American government. From December 19, 1945 to August 15, 1945, the press was controlled through Byron Price's Office of Censorship which was responsible for the most extensive government censorship of the media in United States history (Davison, 2009, p. 7). Newspapers also censored themselves, as they did not publish photographs of dead American soldiers until 1944, and even then the names, units, and locations were not always listed to prevent security breaches (Davison, 2009, p. 7). During the Second World War, the press prided itself on keeping the secrets of the military and was even considered to be an extension of the government's foreign policy efforts. In fact, newspaper reporters knew the greatest secret of World War II and were present at the testing of the atomic bomb—a secret that was kept the vice president himself (Prochnau, 1995, p. 22).

The Korean War was the first noteworthy war to occur during the age of television, though this conflict is not widely considered a televised war due to the infancy of television and the smaller number of viewers (Humphreys, 2010, para. 2). Nonetheless, this war was much like its predecessor in that the media reports were censored to maintain a largely positive outlook. For instance, any reports of casualty numbers or derogatory comments about commanders were forbidden by General Douglas MacArthur whose headquarters in Tokyo controlled outgoing news reports (Hallin, 1986, p. 38).

## **Early War Reports from Vietnam**

The examples of censorship prior to the Vietnam War are important because they set a stark contrast for the complete media disclosure that would occur in the later part of the Vietnam War. Early Vietnam War reporting appeared mainly in print on the radio because television news reporting was still in its infancy. The reality of the newly-created technology of television was that the equipment was far too difficult to carry on the battlefield. At the same time, the CBS News network thought the use of the portable "filmo" camera matched with sound recordings was the future of war reporting (Prochnau, 1995, p.30). Aside from this technical detail, early Vietnam War correspondents faced many difficulties. The war was in its infancy,

and it was difficult to fathom “with its cultural, political, and historical contexts so different from Western tradition” (Turner, 1985, p. 5), and Americans simply were not interested in the war during the earlier years. Nonetheless, reports on the war were relatively positive, and early war correspondents began by emphasizing the skill, toughness, commitment, and compassion of the American troops, which carried over from the romanticized ideals of the World War Two soldier (Huebner, 2005, p. 4).

At the beginning of the war, the media had almost unlimited access to the fighting. War correspondents provided a blend of information, both good and bad, while remaining in favour of the American military (Hallin, 1986, p. 6). Reporters at the time believed in a commitment to national security, and they acted as responsible advocates of the attitude that many Americans held (Hallin, 1986, p. 9). Reporters also willingly accepted imposed censorship of certain military operations to support the government’s wishes, and they built trust with the officers in the field (Slanger, 2009, p. 40). However, the media’s beliefs did not stop the government from keeping reporters in the dark. President John F. Kennedy did not want to appear to be violating the Geneva Accord and was unwilling to publicly admit that the United States was actually involved in a war. However, news correspondents on the ground knew that this was not a minor conflict involving a few American advisors. Kennedy’s failure to openly admit that American troops were fighting a war resulted in a lack of communication between government officials in Vietnam, and reporters grew tired of hearing half-truths from those officials who themselves were in the dark (Prochnau, 1995, p. 22). To appease the media, the government devised the “Five O’clock Follies,” which were daily news briefings that covered the activity of the military advisors and were intended to provide the press with updates on the war. These briefings were not favoured by the press, because they often presented inaccurate accounts and misrepresented facts (Slanger, 2009, p. 50). Although he publically denied it, President Kennedy maintained an active role in monitoring the final message that Americans heard. This can be seen, for example, in a report that followed the 1963 battle of Ap Bac, which reported that the Viet Cong had shot down one American helicopter when, in fact, four had been shot down but three had been recovered and repaired (Slanger, 2009, p. 45).

Regardless of this, the government attempted to paint a picture of progress in Vietnam (Hallin, 1986, p. 8). The Kennedy administration made it a point to pursue a press policy that

presented its own version of the events in Vietnam, and, although it did not deny freedom of the press, it attempted to manipulate information and blame the press for misreporting (Slanger, 2009, p. 56). This would backfire when reporters grew tired of feeling censored and discovered they did not have to rely on military officials for news, but could instead get information from those soldiers in the field with whom they had built a rapport (Slanger, 2009, p. 40). They would also get their information from Radio Catinat, the name given to the system of sharing information by word of mouth in a network of small Vietnamese cafés (Prochnau, 1995, p. 13). Early press reports of the Vietnam War were positive and supportive of the war effort, but as the conflict unfolded, reporters became more active in revealing the disenchanting truth to the American people, which led to a public outcry for the fighting to cease.

## **The First Televised War**

The Vietnam War does not appear in the history books as having a clearly-defined start date, but instead, it began slowly by escalating the military presence of the United States in South Vietnam. It was late 1965 when American troops were openly committed to the Vietnam War effort and there was great support from the American public. Lyndon B. Johnson was the president of the United States after the 1963 Kennedy assassination, and since his concerns about communist aggression were well known, he was able to reassure communist-fearing Americans that the purpose of the war was worthwhile (Hallin, 1986, pp.61-62). However, this enthusiasm did not last long, as the war waged on for years, and American citizens began openly questioning the government's desire to be at war. Johnson's cause was also not aided by the rise of television, which only served as a mechanism to accelerate the distaste of those back home.

In 1963 during the early years of the conflict, television came of age (Hallin, 1986, p. 105). The "living room war" was the name given to the Vietnam War, since for the first time in history the fighting could be seen right at home while preparing dinner. Once television became an important medium to communicate the news to the masses, the intensity of the war coverage changed. The stories mainly focused on the soldiers in action and camera crews followed troops to cover the stories from the field (Hallin, 1986, p. 134). With the advent of televised

war, network news programs were no longer just press releases which were re-read on camera, but they became original, planned segments with correspondents on site to explain what was occurring. Televised news segments expanded from 15 to 30 minutes, which put them “at the fringe of prime time” and called for more stories and more coverage (Turner, 1985, p.4). In September 1963, President Kennedy sat for an interview with CBS News for what was an historic moment in television history since it was the first news program to have been extended into a 30 minute timeslot (Prochnau, 1995, p. 407). Prochnau (1995) goes on to say that although Kennedy was unhappy with his interview, the interview itself showed that television had stepped into the future and that seemingly nothing could be off limits (p. 407). Although many today assume that television presented the gore of the war, the earlier television segments were actually not as graphic as the coverage that followed 1968, yet they still documented the perils of war for those watching (Hallin, 1986, p. 129). In a *New York Times* article from May 1967, the journalist tells the story of an American woman who was watching the news on television late one evening only to discover that her son had just been injured and was being filmed lying on the ground receiving medical attention. The mother received a telegram the next day explaining that her son had been injured but this official notification arrived after she had already witnessed her son’s injury on television (Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1990, p. 83). Lengthy television footage directly from the battlefield made it nearly impossible for the government to manipulate every piece of information as it had done in previous wars, and the media’s tolerance for secrecy would continue to fade as the war waged on.

Television was considered the latest and most innovative way to communicate news of the war to the masses and made those who delivered the message the ones who Americans felt they could trust. Before 1967 the messages that were delivered were laced with little criticism, but in early 1967, news anchors began to express their opinions on the war and aired stories that showed the “frustration of fighting the war that Vietnam had become” (Hallin, 1986, p. 133). CBS News correspondent Dan Rather was quoted as referring to Vietnam as “this dirty little war,” and from April through to the end of 1967, television’s image of the war became increasingly contradictory (Hallin, 1986, p. 133). Perhaps the most trusted news anchor of the war was Walter Cronkite whose early reports were in support of the war effort. Cronkite was considered as a sort of father figure and gradually became more trusted than the government

during the war. President Johnson, who maintained a love-hate relationship with the press and routinely sought to impress the press, was quoted as having said, “if I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost middle America” (Moise, 2005, pp. 111-112).

## **The Tet Offensive**

There were many moments during the war that shocked American viewers, but certain key events have been recognized as the ones that sparked change in the tolerance of those reporting the stories and those watching them from home. On January 31, 1968, the North Vietnamese launched the infamous Tet Offensive, which was intended to happen on the Chinese New Year to both rally fighters and trick the American military into assuming that fighting would cease that day. Throughout the country, garrisons were attacked by the North, capitals were seized, and even the embassy of the United States in Saigon was captured. The fighting lasted for just over a week, and the calculations that followed showed that approximately 58,000 Americans and 1,400,000 Vietnamese had died (Woods, 2008, para. 1). It was the heaviest fighting of the war to date, and the standard view of the offensive today is that it was a significant military setback for the North Vietnamese since their casualty numbers far exceeded those of both the Americans and the South Vietnamese. (Hallin, 1986, p. 169). The offensive was a shock to the American military and public, as it came unexpectedly and seemingly without warning. The offensive also holds great significance when considering public opinion (Woods, 2008, para. 54). The Tet Offensive is remembered as the event that “shattered American morale at home” (Hallin, 1986, p. 168), and this battle is most often pointed to as the event that demonstrated just how powerful the media truly was. It began a period of exceptional journalistic activity. The percentage of television stories in which journalists editorialized jumped from a pre-Tet average of 5.9% to 20% during the two months following the attacks. Many newspapers started running front page editorials, and the emergence of “investigative reporting” caused a stir when a piece ran in *The New York Times* shortly after the offensive (Hallin, 1986, p. 169). Before this jump in journalistic activity, many of President Johnson’s officials maintained a positive stance on the war. However, after the Tet Offensive even his advisors started becoming more persuaded by what they heard in the news (Moise, 2005, pp. 431-432). True to President Johnson’s predictions, it was Walter

Cronkite who would send shockwaves through the government and the American people with a CBS News broadcast he gave shortly after the Tet Offensive occurred:

It seems now more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate...and for every means we have to escalate, the enemy can match us...And with each escalation, the world comes closer to the brink of cosmic disaster. To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe...the optimists who have been wrong in the past. To suggest we are on the edge of defeat is to yield to unreasonable pessimism. To say we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion (Turner, 1985, p. 231).

This degree of national news coverage concerned President Johnson, as he felt that the whole story was not being told and that the media was only looking to “provide the most lurid and depressing accounts of the Tet Offensive” (Turner, 1985, p. 233). However, after receiving criticism from government officials, Cronkite later claimed that he was not implying that the Tet Offensive was a communist military victory, but instead that there had been no clear winner or loser and likely would not be, resulting in an eventual stalemate (Moise, 2005, p. 111). Regardless of Johnson’s backlash, this battle was one that horrified American audiences, as the United States military was forced to use heavy air strike artillery to attack the enemy. Americans were also horrified by the release of a photograph of a North Vietnamese general executing a prisoner (Moise, 2005, p. 392).

The My Lai massacre was another incident during the war that shocked Americans, but this time it was due to the direct actions of the American military. On March 16, 1968, the agitated and frustrated American soldiers of Charlie Company, 11<sup>th</sup> Brigade, entered the village of My Lai in the South Vietnamese district of Son—an area known to be heavily flooded with the disguised Viet Cong enemy. It was later reported that, upon entering the village, the soldiers were told, “this is what you’ve been waiting for, search and destroy ... and you’ve got it” by their superior, Lt. William Calley (PBS, 2005, para. 1-6). However, Lieutenant Calley did not know that the information he had received was inaccurate and that there were no Viet Cong guerrillas present, only peasants. Exhaustion and agitation had already taken their toll on the men, and once the soldiers realized that there were no enemies present, they continued to kill the villagers, including the elderly, women, and children. It was also reported that the soldiers



raped women, burned down homes, and killed livestock. The final estimated death toll from the massacre was 347 Vietnamese, although it is also believed that some additional killing occurred in the nearby hamlet of Binh Tay. Initial media reports described the event as an attack against the Viet Cong, and this was accepted without question. A year later, Ronald Ridenour (a soldier who had heard of the massacre from friends) broke the cover-up, prompting an investigation that ended in the conviction of Lieutenant Calley for the murder of 22 civilians. Calley was pardoned shortly after (Moise, 2005, pp. 267-268).

Once the story had changed from the Americans defending themselves to the Americans mercilessly killing peasants, the media was outraged by the intended mismanagement and censorship of information by the military. Allegations from My Lai survivors that there were many more unreported casualties started flooding television networks and newspapers. The media also started covering the investigation and trial of Lieutenant Calley, and photos from the “My Lai Slaughter” (Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1999, pp.162) were published in the news on November 20, 1969. *Time Magazine* also ran an editorial that same month which told the full story about the massacre and what had actually happened, calling it the incident that “ranks as the most serious atrocity yet attributed to American troops in a war that is already well known for its particular savagery” (Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1999, p. 165). *Stars and Stripes* also ran reports on the trial in December 1969, saying that Calley chose to remain tight-lipped on the matter (Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1999, pp. 163-165). The My Lai massacre caused such rage that in 1970 the *Art Workers Coalition* in New York City used a quotation from an interview between CBS News anchor Mike Wallace and a soldier who was at the massacre to design a visual that would aid in stopping the war. The poster shows the bodies of some of the My Lai victims lying in a ditch in a pool of blood with the words “Q: And babies?” written at the top and “A: And babies” at the bottom—both in red ink. Originally intended for the Museum of Modern Art, this poster was a sensation and became one of the most famous posters of the Vietnam War era (Vallen, 2005, para. 4). Once again an image from the media was used to instil further disgust in the American public who were witnessing the war from home.

## The Girl in the Picture

The photo from the Vietnam War that would haunt those near and far was captured on June 8, 1972, in the village of Trang Bang just 30 minutes outside of Saigon. Kim Phuc, commonly referred to as “the girl in the picture,” was just nine years old at the time and fell victim to a misplaced bomb that contained the chemical napalm, which incinerates human flesh on contact. Associated Press photographer Nick Ut took pity on the poor girl and, after having snapped images of her running away from the burning village, he rushed her to a local hospital. Kim was later transported to a children’s hospital in Saigon, where she endured an intense recovery that lasted 14 months. Kim sustained third degree burns over 35% of her body, and even after leaving the hospital, she required years of painful physical therapy. She also unwillingly became a national symbol of war for the Vietnamese government. Kim and her husband defected to Canada in 1992 and she later became a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador of Peace (Geurts, n.d., Main section).

That photo of the young girl inflicted with unimaginable wounds was one of the final occurrences that broke many Americans’ will to continue fighting the Vietnam War, even though there had been much backlash from the public before its release. George Esper, the Associated Press bureau chief who remained in Saigon until the very end of the war, explains why this photograph was so meaningful: “In her [Phuc’s] expression was fear and horror, which was how people felt about the war. This picture showed the effects of war, and how wrong and destructive it was. People looked at it and said, ‘This war has got to end’” (Chong, 2000, p. xiii). He also states that this photograph was haunting because it captured not just one evil aspect of war, but an evil that is present in every war. The photograph of Phuc appeared on the front page of newspapers all over the world after its release (Chong, 2000, p. xiii) and would spark massive outcry from the majority of Americans who were already demanding that the war come to an end.

There were other battles and cover-ups that fuelled the shift in journalistic tone as the war escalated. However, it is important to note that even though the media became increasingly sceptical of the government and the effort, it did not seek to publicly attack the lone soldier who was fighting an honest fight for his country. Instead, the image of American troops remained

sympathetic, and one reporter finished his story in the later years by stating that “one thing does seem for sure: The average American soldier no longer wants any part of this war—even in a defensive posture” (Hallin, 1986, p. 180).

## **The Anti-War Movement**

A large number of Americans wanted nothing to do with the war, and protests spread rapidly throughout the country. The anti-war movement began around 1963, when a few Americans began openly protesting and had grown in size by 1965. The striking thing about the anti-Vietnam protests was that they involved people from every walk of life: people who were enthusiastic about the war; people who did not like communism but were opposed to forcing democracy on another state; people who did not believe that North Vietnam was actually communist; people who thought war was a terrible thing; and people who did not care about right or wrong but objected to the financial cost of war. University students were a recognizable force during the anti-war movement and the first “teach-in” demonstration of the students’ disagreement with the war occurred at the University of Michigan in March 1965. The event was so popular that other institutions began organizing similar events across the country, and, although these events were peaceful, the anti-war movement would not remain peaceful for long. The movement never had any sort of tight, unified leadership, but protesters took comfort in political anti-war figures such as Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., who instilled the value that change could be made peacefully. However, with the assassination of both these men in 1968, the peaceful protests soon turned to radical acts of violence across the country, which would continue sporadically until 1972 when the last major protest occurred (Moise, 2005, pp. 34-38).

Among all this outrage and chaos across the country, where did the media stand? The war journalism of Vietnam did not purposefully instigate public outrage but it did play an indirect role in halting the war, as the public was became frustrated with what it saw in the news and began to feel the government could not be trusted to do the right thing. What frightened Americans most about what they were witnessing was that the fighting, which had begun far away from them but moved closer to home in the form of escalating anti-war protests (Hallin, 1986, p. 194). The anti-war movement occurred during the rise of the Black Power

movement—a critical point in the African American struggle to gain equal rights. African American citizens and soldiers were not treated as equal to their white counterparts, yet they were still subject to the draft. The fire back home was fuelled even further by reports such as one *The Washington Post* ran in April 1969, in which the reporter describes two African American soldiers saying that they wanted to have a hearing with their superior to tell him how they felt about the issue. The article ended with “a few weeks later Daniels and Harvey were arrested and in November were tried before a general court martial” (Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1990, p. 147). In May 1969, the battle of Hamburger Hill occurred, and a conflict between those in the government and the American military emerged in the press. Senator Edward Kennedy openly denounced the battle in the Senate as “senseless and irresponsible,” and the controversy that followed this led to President Nixon, Lyndon B. Johnson’s successor, eventually ordering American troops to be more considerate of casualties before making a move (Moise, 2005, p. 167). With a government that no longer agreed on the military efforts, and reports of troops losing morale and just wanting to go home, it is not surprising that the public would greatly protest the war. The government was losing its united front, and this caused those viewing the media reports to question the motives of their leaders and turn against the war effort.

## **Conclusion**

Since the end of the Vietnam War, conflict journalism has drastically changed in style. The “living room war” was the first of its kind in that the American government was unable to fully censor media reporting when it had been able to do so in past wars. Reasons for this include television’s realistic documentation of events for the public and the media’s use of alternate sources instead of relying solely on American officials. However, the government still attempted to censor the early reports—a process that was made difficult by the unwillingness to admit that America was actually at war. The government found itself in a catch 22: How do you censor something you haven’t admitted is happening?

In an attempt to please the media, the government tried to present reporters with information that was not true. As a result, reporters went where they knew they could find the truth, and, as the war progressed, concealed less of it in their stories. As the war continued, those journalists

who were present began to see that the facts about major events were being misrepresented by those in power. Combined with constant exposure to the violence of war in the media, Americans began to doubt their government and protest the war. At the time, journalists may not have been able to predict how much of an uproar their no-holds-barred reporting would cause, yet the ramifications of such disclosures set the Vietnam War apart from its predecessors and those conflicts that came after. Since Vietnam, government statements are manipulated and strategically planned and the audience at home is treated to footage that is significantly less matter-of-fact than it was during the Vietnam War. Also, officials frequently answer questions using the phrase “no comment”. Deliberate half-truths and avoidance of direct answers are the tactics used during press conferences, and even in a world where news can travel faster than ever, footage from the front lines of battle is hardly seen. While these methods of “handling” the press can be attributed to modern threats against national security, one cannot help but feel that the government learnt the true power of the media’s message during the Vietnam War and have since adopted an air of caution when disclosing information. In the words of the late Walter Cronkite, “and that’s the way it is.”

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