

When casualties increased, war coverage became more negative

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As the number of U.S. casualties rose in Afghanistan, reporters filed more stories about the conflict and those articles grew increasingly negative about both the war effort and the military, according to a Penn State researcher. "When the war in Afghanistan started, the tone of the stories that reporters filed was generally neutral," said Michel Haigh, associate professor of communications. "However, over time, and as casualties increased, the coverage became more negative." In 2003, as the media began to focus more on the conflict in Iraq, reporters wrote less than 20 stories about Afghanistan in the newspapers that Haigh and her assistants analyzed. They examined articles about the war from major newspapers during a 10-year period—from 2001 to 2010. However, between 2009 and 2010, when casualties reached their highest levels, there were more than 450 articles written about the war in Afghanistan.

The negativity toward the war effort was reflected in the stories written by reporters in the field, as well as articles written by journalists in the U.S. and in other countries, said Haigh, who released her findings in a recent issue of *Newspaper Research Journal*.

While reporters who were embedded in military units in previous conflicts tended to be more positive about the military, embedded reporters in Afghanistan were typically negative about the military, according to Haigh. In fact, reporters in Afghanistan wrote stories with tones that were slightly less positive about the military than reporters who wrote their articles outside the country.

"This isn't the type of story we expected from embedded reporters," Haigh said. "Typically, the use of embeds in a military unit leads to more positive reporting, however, coverage in Afghanistan was negative, regardless of whether the journalists reported from in Afghanistan or outside the country."

The researchers also said that another difference in the coverage was how reporters framed their stories. Framing refers to how reporters decide to tell the story. For example, a journalist may decide to focus the story on the war on terrorism or on casualties. In this case, reporters both inside and outside of Afghanistan reported on the increasing [casualties](#), although reporters who were not in Afghanistan did write stories on the economic and political impact of the conflict.

According to Haigh, there were fewer embedded reporters in Afghanistan than in previous conflicts. Because newspapers pay to have embedded reporters travel with the troops, the cost of sending reporters to file stories in Afghanistan was too expensive for most news outlets that were struggling during the economic downturn. War fatigue may have been another reason for fewer embedded reporters. The American public was tired of hearing about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Haigh and her assistants examined more than 1,100 articles from three national newspapers—the New York Times, Los Angeles Times and The Washington Post. A group of eight coders was trained to analyze the frames and tone of the stories. The coders did not consider opinion and editorial columns when they analyzed the content. An area for future research may be to match this content analysis with [public opinion polls](#) to determine whether the media coverage affected public support for the [war](#).

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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