

Chapter 5

The Filmed Wars: New Audience Frontiers and Invisible Boundaries

ABSTRACT

In the late 1960's, unfamiliar people, exotic places and violent battles—all part of the Vietnam War—appeared on television screens around the world, in living color. Film cameras and sound equipment captured shocking images and stories audiences had never seen before. The Vietnam War, presented by popular networks like CBS and told through the words and expert storytelling abilities of respected broadcasters like Walter Cronkite, “magically” appeared in our living rooms. This top down delivery method (i.e., “one to many” mass broadcasting rather than the UGC bottom up distribution model common in YouTube’s digital sphere) made the television viewing experience live rather than pre-recorded in terms of the news cast itself. The audience experienced the Vietnam War narrative as if they were actually there but also in a passive way. However, today, YouTube offers the Vietnam War story as an on-demand active experience and the original network broadcasts have been repurposed, rebroadcast, altered, and appended with YouTubers’ textual comments and mashed-up videos about the Vietnam War and current worldwide military conflicts. YouTube provides a bridge between the past, present and future, using words, images and sounds that teach us a great deal about the Vietnam, Persian Gulf, and Iraq wars. Important conclusions can be drawn about how these events connect and relate. YouTubers have a lot to say about the Vietnam War and their comments on broadcast television news shows and programming from the past illuminate that time and the future. Broadcast television news video production technology, specifically the reduction in equipment size, accessibility and production equipment cost has facilitated new ways of telling war stories. Today, the concept of the embedded news reporter is common in war reporting and, in fact, very desirable in terms of driving viewers to broadcast network programming as embedded reporting is an effective and engaging story-telling technique. The embedded reporter has evolved and empowered the average YouTuber to take an active role in producing breaking news content and uploading that content live to YouTube and other websites.

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THE FILMED WAR AND BEING SOCIAL WITH OLD MEDIA

A good way to examine and explore YouTube is by looking at the Internet's influential technological and cultural impact on our shared history. However, as YouTube is a very young technology and cultural influencer, a comprehensive examination presents a significant challenge. For example, film and television technologies and techniques are almost 175 years old when combined. YouTube will be 11 years old in 2016. Fortunately, much of YouTube's content is prerecorded video from news and journalistic sources, and that content (e.g., important political events, elections, concerts, newscasts and wars—widely covered world events that were cataloged and recorded using photographic still and moving images from film and television) is historically relevant.

One particularly influential event—the Vietnam War—which everyone agrees is historically important, can easily be traced by watching YouTube's compilation reels, archived network news broadcasts from during the Vietnam War on YouTube and pictures of what people were saying about the war *during the time of the war*. A study of the Vietnam War, through the YouTube lens, also gives us the benefit of seeing what was actually communicated to people during that time, rather than our collective memory of it, and the journalistic practices used in reporting the Vietnam War. Also, YouTube allows us to compare how journalists reported subsequent wars, such as the Persian Gulf and Iraq wars, with YouTubers' written and video comments and responses. YouTube shapes and bridges our cultural memory and feelings about war across time. In effect, YouTube is the cultural “mirror” and “window” for the Vietnam, Persian Gulf and Iraq wars, presented in words, pictures and music. Viewers who watched the television news in the late 1960s—live—were shown poignant and sometimes shocking images of the war leading to a description of the Vietnam War as the first “filmed war” and “living room war.” Many of those original broadcast television viewers are now YouTubers who post their personal views and upload videos about the Vietnam War.

The United States is a country that loves drama. Magazine covers, television broadcasts, and YouTube channels reflect the emphasis on the dramatic elements in everyday life. Television drama is improving, as well as audience expectations. The Academy of Arts and Sciences, home of the Emmy, states that episodic television has improved because more Hollywood writers are drawn to high-quality cable television storytelling and exert more creative control over their work. “The best TV series—both within an episode and throughout a season—are all about story. The more a film or TV show is based on well-told story, as opposed to visual spectacle and detail, the more its authorship is based on the writer, not the director” (Truby, 2013, p. 37). Television news has often sought dramatic content, with CBS creating the “60 Minutes” long-form news show and similar copycat programs on other networks. For example, shows such as ABC News 20/20 set aside 6 to 8 minutes of its programming schedule for O. J. Simpson updates in the mid-1990s. Like other people, reporters share this thirst for excitement. Broadcast news television reporters crave information and stories that provide good dramatic elements, which can be tightly constructed and woven into printed and televised communication formats. As Pierre Bourdieu as pointed out, these elements in television create a reality effect:

They [journalists] show things and make people believe what they show . . . the simple report, the very fact of reporting, of putting on record as a reporter, always implies a social construction of reality that can mobilize (or demobilize) individuals or groups. (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 21)

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