Examining Media Coverage: A Classroom Study of Iraq War News

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Throughout the 2003 school year, my ninth grade global history students followed the media's coverage of the escalating crisis between the United States and Iraq. In early March of that year, as the media's coverage intensified, students brought a multitude of questions and concerns into the classroom. Rather than simply answer these questions, I saw the unfolding events as a "teachable moment" and planned a project to analyze how the media depict significant events.

I decided that our classroom project would center on the U.S.-Iraqi conflict. In an effort to minimize any influence of my own opinions, the project would not deal with whether the war was "right" or "wrong." Instead, we would investigate the local media's coverage. My primary goal was to approach the coverage by drawing from a critical constructivist model. White asserts that such a model can be implemented by "modeling and applying, reflecting, involving students actively, and developing a community of learners." This project would also draw upon National Council for the Social Studies curriculum standards as students explored the relationships between power, authority, and governance (NCSS strand 3). More specifically, this project would focus on "the conditions, actions, and motivations that contribute to conflict and cooperation within and among nations." 6

A Critical Model for Analyzing the Media

To fully grasp the political, social, and economic forces that have shaped the United States relationship with Iraq through to March of 2003, students needed to be exposed to much more than the slogans that were being transmitted in the newspapers, on the radio, and on television. To illustrate, just days before the United States fired missiles at Baghdad, MSNBC started "Countdown: Iraq," an electronic ticker counting down the hours Saddam Hussein had to comply with George W. Bush's ultimatum to leave Iraq. Throughout the days leading up to the war, CNN's slogan "Showdown: Iraq," generally preceded each half-hour segment of its twenty-four hour coverage of the conflict. Other news outlets also ran similar slogans such as NBC's "Target Iraq," CBS's "America at War," and ABC's "War in Iraq." The media neatly packaged the war as a commodity to be consumed rather than a complex historical event to be studied, reflected upon, and actively scrutinized.

Indeed, the mass media can be a powerful educational force as it provides constant information and ideas, reinforces values, shapes expectations, and conveys models for appropriate action. 4 Hepburn outlines how media analysis can be used as a heuristic to arouse student interest, identify propaganda, learn the difference between fact and opinion, explore marketing techniques, and encourage parents to become involved in their child's schoolwork. 4 Studying how various media outlets depict major events allows social studies teachers to encourage authentic historical inquiry. By analyzing the construction of print and broadcast media, students can develop their own knowledge and opinions on controversial events. Tillman, in an effort to help students understand the circumstances surrounding the Bosnian War, created a three-day unit where his eighth grade geography students analyzed video footage of an hour-long ABC News special. 5

The model I used to analyze the media consists of four parts:

1. teaching students the political, social, and economic context in which an historical event takes place,
2. identifying the various groups of people whose lives are linked to the conflict,
3. analyzing newspaper and television news broadcasts devoted to covering that particular event, and
4. writing formal evaluations on how the media covered an event.

I have used this strategy within my global history course to teach about the Hutu-Tutsi conflict that resulted in genocide in Rwanda (1994), the ongoing conflict between India and Pakistan, the student protests in China's Tiananmen Square (1989), and the conflict between the Sandinistas and Contras during Nicaragua's civil war (1985-1990).

My goal in creating this project was for my students to learn about this event as persons embedded within an historical context, endowed with what Paulo Freire called an historical "presence." 6 In developing this project, I wanted students not only to become well-read in contemporary political affairs, but to acquire the skills to critically evaluate the way the media frames information.

Rooting Inquiry in Social, Political and Economic Antecedents

In initiating our study, we constructed a concept map entitled "U.S.-Iraqi Conflict." Concept maps are useful as they allow students to arrange information hierarchically and "represent meaningful relationships between concepts in the form of propositions." 7 The concept "U.S.-Iraqi Conflict" was listed at the top of the page.
Iraqi relations had deteriorated by 1989 when Hussein began developing chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons programs. That relationship had completely deteriorated by 1990 when Iraq invaded Kuwait. At this juncture, students were provided with a synopsis of the Persian Gulf War and the U.S.’s successful effort in pushing Iraqi forces out of Kuwait. The next segment of our map featured information about the UN sanctions placed on Iraq and mentions that hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians reportedly died as a result. After exploring international efforts to lift or circumvent UN sanctions in 2000, our map ended with January 29, 2002, when President Bush, in his State of the Union Address, proclaimed the existence of “an axis of evil” consisting of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea.

The third branch of our concept map addressed the economic element of the conflict. A critical look at the U.S.-Iraqi conflict required us to examine the context of economic relationships. To illustrate the economic aspects of this conflict, students were required to read The Washington Post article “In Iraqi War Scenario, Oil is Key Issue” as well as an article published in the Nation magazine entitled “Oiling the Wheels of War.” The newspaper articles pointed out two important issues. First, Iraq, according to the Post article, is home to “112 billion barrels of crude oil, the largest in the world outside Saudi Arabia.” The article also stated that France, Russia, China, India, Algeria, Italy, and Spain had previously reached, or were negotiating oil deals with Iraq. A war in Iraq threatened such deals and might, according to the article, lead to a reshuffling of world petroleum markets. Indeed, in September of 2002, Total Fina Elf, a French oil company, was in the process of brokering a deal with Saddam Hussein to gain access to a crude oil field in Majnoon, which is thought to have 10 to 30 billion barrels of oil reserves. Second, the Nation magazine article points out that not only is oil an issue, it is actually an American preoccupation as the U.S. is becoming “dangerously dependent” on Middle Eastern oil.

Our concept map also illustrated that U.S.-
the Cheney report, after its primary author) suggests that “Growing worries about the stability of Saudi Arabia, principal U.S. supplier there [the Middle East], heightened by the revelations of Saudi extremists involvement in the September 11 terror attacks, have prompted U.S. strategists to seek a backup should future instability lead to a drop in Saudi oil production, which could lead to a global recession.” The economic circumstance surrounding the conflict completed the third branch of our concept map (see Figure 3). Once students understood the social, historical, and economic aspects of the conflict, we turned to analyzing the media.

Humanistic Inquiry
In preparing students to examine the local media’s coverage of the war, we started not with a list of content objectives, but a list of people who would be affected by any conflict between the United States and Iraq. Before learning the social, historical, and economical aspects of the crisis, students generated a list of people that included civilians (e.g., CNN journalist Christiane Amanpour), military personnel (e.g., U.S. General Tommy Franks), and politicians (e.g., Vice President Dick Cheney). Students generated a second list that included all of the nations involved. The list, although not exhaustive, included the United States, Great Britain, Iraq, Israel, France, Germany, Russia, Australia, Syria, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. In an effort to simplify our task, we decided to narrow the list down to four groups: the U.S., Iraq, Britain, and “other.” Students suggested that anyone not directly involved in the conflict would be catalogued as other. Once we created the two lists, I guided students in making a template consisting of two axis. The first axis ran vertically and it included the three groups of people: civilians, military personnel, and politicians and the second axis ran horizontally and included the following nations: U.S., Iraq, Great Britain, and “other.”

Once we had explored the historical and economic background of the U.S.-Iraqi conflict and developed our template, we set out to analyze how the local Syracuse newspaper, The Post Standard, and local news stations were covering the impending war. Students were required to collect information on ten newspaper articles (with the exception of op-ed pieces) and ten televised news segments. For each segment, students gathered specific information using a pre-constructed format. Students had two weeks to gather this information before they were to report their findings to the class.

This exercise gave the students an opportunity to discuss any concerns or confusion they had regarding particular figures that seemed to cross lines. To illustrate, one male student was uncertain whether Pope John Paul II would be a political figure or a civilian. Another student was not sure if Donald Rumsfeld should be categorized as a political figure or a member of the military. Once we placed the quotes under the proper categories, students were encouraged to determine who was quoted the most by calculating percentages for each category. For instance, after calculating his percentages, one student found that 87 percent of the people who were quoted were Americans, while 6 percent were Iraqi, 3 percent were British, and 4 percent were from other nations. Once this exercise was complete, students were provided with their culminating activity. The activity required students to write a formal essay in which they answered five questions:

1. What can you learn about the U.S.-Iraqi crisis from reading the Post Standard and watching the local news?
2. In terms of the groups of people involved in the war, which ones were interviewed, quoted, or shown the most?
3. Were there any groups of people who would be directly affected by the war that were not given equal time to speak?
4. Were there any relevant historical or contemporary issues that were not featured in the news?
5. Do you feel that the local media provides complete coverage of the conflict between the U.S. and Iraq?

Nationalism, Unbalanced Coverage, and Political Economy

During the time students had been collecting information the political climate had changed. Ironically, the projects were to be completed only two weeks after the war began. After reading five classes of papers, I noticed that three patterns emerged. First, it was clear that students who had family or friends in the armed forces felt strongly about the assignment. Many students adorned the cover of their essays with nationalistic symbols such as the American flag, bald eagles, maps of the United States, and pictures of U.S. Marines. Two students decided to add personal statements at the conclusion of their papers. One student wrote: “I would like to pay my respect to all of the people who have died and those who will give their lives in the future war with Iraq.” Another student closed her paper with this statement: “I Fully Support Our U.S. Troops And Hope For A Safe Return.”

The second theme that emerged was that many students, after completing their research, found the local media coverage to be unsatisfactory. One student, after constructing and analyzing her template, stated the following:

Judging from interviews, quotes, and pictures, some people’s point of view seem to be heard more than others…. United States politicians were heard 59 percent of the time during television news segments and in newspaper articles, Iraqi politicians were heard 15 percent of the time, Great Britain’s politicians were heard 3 percent of the time, and “other” politicians were heard 23 percent of the time…. The United States military spoke out more than other military did, as well. It got 76 percent of the time, and Iraqi and British militaries got 12 percent each. … The civilian numbers were surprising as well. I heard from Americans 75 percent of the time, Iraqis 10 percent, British 10 percent, and civilians in other countries 5 percent of the time…. In addition, 69 percent of all the people who had spoken were from the United States, 11 percent were from Iraq, 8 percent were from Great Britain, and 12 percent were from another country.

Not only were students disappointed by the media’s apparent focus on American voices, many were also concerned that the media did not provide information on some of the historical antecedents leading up to the war. To illustrate, one female student wrote:

There were … some relevant issues I did not see featured in the news. For example, in 1983, the United States, Great Britain, France, and Germany gave weapons, money, and intelligence to Saddam Hussein…. Also, in 1996, economic sanctions placed in Iraq prevented food and medicine from getting into the country. As a result, there were [hundreds of thousands] of civilian deaths….

The third theme that emerged addressed expectations for the media as well as the meaning of complete coverage. Another student detected a difference between the quality of the print media and the broadcast media. She found that “a person can learn so much more about this war from reading the newspapers, than watching the news.” The information offered in newspapers, she believed, “was hard for a person to absorb in the short time of a broadcast” as “the reporters squeeze all the information about war into a five-minute long segment.” One male student stated that although issues were omitted from television broadcasts, it was because they are limited by time. Another male student approved of the media coverage of the war:

I feel that the local media is providing more than “complete” coverage of this war. The news has everything that happens in Iraq.
as soon as it occurs. Also, cameras stationed in Iraq give you an idea of how things are going over there. Back during World War I and II, I’m sure that people didn’t have any idea how the war was going until later on. The technology today lets the local media provide us civilians with coverage and information about the war.

Other students also felt that although the media was limited by time and space, it did aim to provide complete coverage of the crisis.

Conclusion
Based on our classroom study, students concluded that the media’s coverage of the U.S.-Iraqi conflict prior to the war was problematic in two ways. First, few newspapers and even fewer news broadcasts offered diverse perspectives on the war. Both newspapers and television news broadcasts were dominated by the voices of Americans, particularly American politicians and military officials. One female student commented, “If United States citizens are going to take an educated stand, either for or against the war, I think they should hear more than one side of the story.” Second, the mass media provided little information about the history of the conflict between the U.S. and Iraq. Few students encountered information related to the Iran-Iraq war, the Reagan administration’s support of Saddam Hussein, or UN sanctions against Iraq in the 1990s. Many students desired to learn more from the media and believed the media had a responsibility to inform the public of what one student termed “the whole picture.”

Analyzing the media as a way to learn about an historic event provided students the opportunity to not only encounter historical facts, but to use their knowledge of the conflict to actively evaluate the media’s coverage. In analyzing the press, students learned that television news stations and newspapers have limited time and space in which to report the news. Thus, students learned that the mass media rarely offers comprehensive coverage of important events. Once students analyzed the media and understood that the stories featured in the news are often the product of selecting particular voices and information, they discovered that media coverage is not always balanced.

If there was any discernible common theme among the 112 papers submitted by students, it was that each paper reflected a unique voice that developed as they studied information and images presented in newspapers and on television news broadcasts. Regardless of whether students thought the media was, or was not offering complete coverage, it is apparent that by critically analyzing the local media many of them learned about the complexity of the war as well as the complexity of the institutions that bring us information.

Notes

Christopher R. Leahey is a social studies teacher at the North Syracuse Junior High School in North Syracuse, N.Y. Many of the ideas in this paper were inspired by his students as well as by a doctoral seminar taught by Dr. Jim Carpenter at Binghamton University. He would like to acknowledge Mary Gosson and Ursula Johnston (school librarians) for teaching his students how to use the electronic newspaper indices and for their continuous support throughout the project.