The Media’s Impact on the Vietnam War: How a War Went From Triumphant Beginnings to a Tragic Ending

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Introduction

The Vietnam War was a lengthy war from the late 1950s to the early 1970s and witnessed a major change in how it was viewed by the Media. Early on the Media as well as the American Public believed the U.S. Government was winning the war in Southeast Asia. However, inconsistency in the U.S. Government's releases to the media brought them to question the Government's integrity.

Of course, the media was not an innocent player who just happened to notice the ambiguity of government and reported it. They often twisted the facts or left out information altogether simply because reporting is primarily a business with information and the more dramatic the information is, the more money it brings. The media's coverage of the Vietnam war changed from support to opposition over time as it learned that the U.S. Government was not truthful to the American Public.

Development of The Media

Before looking into the Vietnam War it is imperative to understand the change in media at that time, especially television. During the war in Vietnam, reporters and photographers enjoyed an unprecedented freedom of both speech (and photography) in South Vietnam seemingly without any censorship from the government. While correspondents in World War II had to submit their works to the inspection of the government, the reporters in Vietnam were given a rare opportunity to join military forces, observe their daily lives and later write about their experience (Hammond, 1990, p. 6). As one can guess, their reports were often subjective and unlike in WWII, they used sources that not only disagreed with one another on some affairs, but
also stayed unnamed. This left the reader somewhat confused and distanced from the “war efforts” (Hallin, 1989).

Hallin (1989) explains that the press was no longer the extension of government; they simply did not feel the responsibility to present news with a certain consideration for a political agenda. He further says that as the press gained more political independence, journalists began to question the authority and decisions of people in power and when in the early 1960s official government policy did not seem to correspond with the actual situation in Vietnam, naturally, journalists expressed their confusion.

Even though the newspapers and radio reported regularly on the situation in Vietnam, and they were important sources of information, it was really television that excited interest among Americans. Not a single war before Vietnam had had the advantage of being portrayed on TV. In an essay *Television Coverage of the Vietnam War and the Vietnam Veteran* by E. McLaughlin; Bonior, Champlin and Kolly (1984) estimate the figures of homes with television. In 1950, it was only 9 percent whereas by 1966, it was already 93 percent.

The opportunity to see the news from all over the world in one’s living room lead to an increase in both the viewer ratings of evening news broadcasting and credibility of the news. In his article, Mandelbaum (1982) describes that it became a widely accepted truth that television gained an immense power and by showing disturbing reality of war it created an unflattering image of American government and soldiers alike. In 1975, Marshall McLuhan contributed to the issue when he said: “Television brought the brutality of war into the comfort of the living room. Vietnam was lost in the living rooms of America, not on the battlefields of Vietnam.” (cited in The Media and the Vietnam War, Truthful or Deceptive?, 2012)

Nevertheless, the images of violence were broadcasted and must have had some impact on Americans, as Hallmann explains in his essay in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern
American Culture from 2006, the atrocities seen went against Americans impression of themselves as heroes and protectors of innocent. As the war was being fought and more lives of both Americans and Vietnamese were being lost, the public support was becoming nonexistent. It is not surprising then that the government decided not to participate in the war any longer.

3 Or a disadvantage, depending on a point of view of an individual

**Early years in Vietnam**

After France was forced to agree to a cease-fire in 1954, it was the United States and President Dwight D. Eisenhower who decided to support Ngo Dinh Diem (4)* in his run for a presidency to keep South Vietnam from a potential threat of communist North Vietnam uniting the whole Vietnam into one communist country.

During the presidency of Diem, there was number of issues, aside from the ones that Diem himself created by his undemocratic policy, that were undermining the newly found republic. There were guerrilla troops from North Vietnam, Viet Minh (5)*, which were quickly gaining support of the peasants in the South by giving them land to work on, in cases of anti communists, by threatening them. Fighting between Viet Minh and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam was more frequent. As an answer, President Eisenhower increased the amount of financial support to $220 million (Anderson, 2011; Historie světa, 1998).

The media reported on the changes in Eisenhower’s policy toward Vietnam, but it did not raise much awareness or alarm among Americans.

4 Ngo Dinh Diem was the first president of South Vietnam from 1955 to 1963.
The Kennedy Administration

Anderson (2011) says that when John F. Kennedy became a president in January 1961, he was almost right away informed by General Edward Lansdale about the dire situation in Vietnam. It was becoming obvious that efforts of Viet Cong (formerly called Viet Minh) to seize control over the South had been successful and it was important to intervene immediately. As Hallin (1989) writes, there was also a report done by Walt Rostow, who generally agreed with the assessment of Gen. Landsdale and together with General Maxwell D. Taylor advised Kennedy to send out 6,000 to 8,000 military troops to help South Vietnamese troops with training and strategy.

After that, there were several articles in newspapers about the expected positive outcome which, as we now know, did not happen, quite the opposite actually, when in the span of just two years the number of the U.S. military personnel climbed up to over 16,000. (Hellman, 2006)

Hallin (1989, p. 30) shows that even though General Taylor advised President to introduce military forces to Vietnam and Kennedy agreed, reporters were being told that Taylor and Kennedy both were “reluctant” to send any Americans. After days off stalling and giving out false information the media finally got a message that President Kennedy would indeed help Vietnam and send a few “advisers”. According to Hallin (1989), this was “the first case of government management of Vietnam news”.

Another rift between the actual situation and political statements was the use of the word “advisers”. While the administration maintained the pretence that they were sending just advisers, it was clear to the reports in the field that they were simply military troops. Hellmann
(2006) adds that they were not even regular soldiers but Green Berets (6)*. Although, when Tom Wicker in January 1962, asked the question whether there were American troops in combat in Vietnam, President Kennedy said a resolute: “No”. (Hallin, 1989, p. 26)

6 Military force specially trained in combat, survival and medical skills.

The Buddhist Crisis

Diem, as a Catholic, supported the Catholic minority and even appointed Catholics and his family members to high government function. The photograph of a burning Buddhist monk taken by Malcolm Browne shocked people all around the world but Hallin (1989) gives evidence that Buddhists in fact invited the journalists and photographers to help them spread the word about their plight. Now, Americans could see that the Diem regime, the regime that was supported by their homeland, could not even spark loyalty in the South Vietnamese people. It was long before American public started to heavily criticize Vietnam War, but it did bring forward the idea that American troops were helping someone who did not have the loyalty of most of the citizens (Hammond, 1988). Because Diem failed to quell the Buddhist crisis as well as failing to make land reforms and win over the South Vietnamese people, the South Vietnamese military with American CIA support overthrew Diem, which resulted in his murder. Events spiraled out of control as Kennedy himself was assassinated.

The Gulf of Tonkin Incident

Johnson, Kennedy’s successor did not want to fail in Vietnam and the Gulf of Tonkin incident gave him the spark that allowed him to escalate the war. The Gulf of Tonkin Incident was also one of the events that contributed to the change in the style of reporting. On August 2,
1964 the U.S. destroyer Maddox was on a secret espionage mission near North Vietnam’s coastline to gather electronic intelligence. As an answer, North Vietnamese fired torpedoes on Maddox to challenge their presence in North Vietnam waters. The U.S. declared they had the right to be in the open sea and sent another destroyer for further surveillance of the coast. (Murray, 2005; Anderson, 2011)

Two days later, electronics operators reported to Washington that they were being under attack. Almost immediately it was followed by messages that the situation was not clear and the supposed attack might have been a mistake. Even though Johnson was not certain of the attack, he used this incident to appeal to Congress who issued The Tonkin Gulf Resolution which stated that:

“... the Congress approves and supports the determination of the President, as Commander in Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.” (Tonkin Gulf Resolution, 1964)

President Johnson had the means and power given by Congress to begin an attack, yet he did not and at the end of September proclaimed: “... for the moment I have not thought we were ready for American boys to do the fighting for Asian boys.... So we are not going north and drop bombs at this stage of the game...” (cited in Hallin, 1989, p. 76)

With the expansion of commitment in Vietnam, the Johnson administration wanted to contain as much information as possible from public. It seems quite understandable that Washington did not want to alarm Americans with the news that the war that was already being fought during Truman’s presidency, was not finishing, but escalating.
Search and Destroy - Media in General Supports the War

After the deployment of large numbers of troops in 1965 due to the Tonkin Incident, it was critical to establish a new strategy in defeating North Vietnamese. General Westmoreland came with a military tactic called search and destroy. It was based on an assumption that if the ground troops took a more active approach, started searching for the Vietcong and North Vietnamese army and destroying it, eventually, there would be no more enemies soldiers left and North Vietnamese government would agree to a peace. (Currey, 2011)

From a military standpoint, it was a sound tactic, but Currey (2011) explains that Gen. Westmoreland did not anticipate the problems that would turn up when facing the reality of battlefield. Currey (2011) mentions that there were hundreds of thousands of North Vietnamese males “reaching a drafting age every year” who simply replaced those who were killed. Another problem was that the North Vietnamese soldier knew the area and climate conditions better and actually initiated a number of attacks. This war of attrition was not working. With this strategy, the air forces were steadily bombing the North Vietnam (7)*, but they also managed to spray “17.6 million gallons of Agent Orange (8)* over 3.6 million acres of Vietnam” in a belief that Ho Chi Minh (9)* would realize that he was losing too many citizens, farming land and food.

Meanwhile in the U.S. it seemed, as Hallin (1989) puts it, that once the U.S. committed fully to the war, the attention of media turned from debating and sometimes questioning the country’s involvement in Vietnam and its purpose to “the effort to win”. In the beginning of the full commitment to the war, when the morale of soldiers was great and the outlook for a success in Vietnam was positive, television was running stories on “American boys in action”. Most of the coverage during the war was done from the battlefield. It was at the end of 1967, when it was being clear that the military forces were not making any progress in stopping the Communists
and the American troops themselves were beginning to feel frustrated and expressed their frustration freely to the journalist, that media reports started to show more of the negative side of the military involvement of the U.S. (McLaughlin, 2012).

7 Specifically: NVA’s military bases, camps and headquarters. Pilots did not intentionally target civilians, but it was inevitable that many villages still got hit.

8 Chemical compound used to destroy flora of Vietnam.

9 North Vietnamese leader

TET Offensive, 1968: The Turning Point

The TET Offensive changed everything. The Johnson Administration told Americans via the Media that the War was being won. However, the all out North Vietnamese and Viet Cong invasion of the cities in the South (TET Offensive) showed that the war was far from over. As Hallin points out, Americans generally believed in a successful outcome of the war and when the reports on the Tet Offensive came, in January, 1968, viewers were shocked to see Vietcong attacking and the number of Americans who believed in a successful outcome dropped from 51 to 32 percent.

The Tet Offensive is most often mentioned as the turning point in Vietnam War. It began at the end of January, 1968 and was characterized as a series of Viet Cong attacks against several military crucial points and more than one hundred cities and towns in South Vietnam (Hammond, 1988). Even though the North Vietnamese were defeated in every battle during the period, Americans were so shocked by the sudden attacks that their support of the Vietnam War began to waver and was eventually lost. When the Tet Offensive happened and it became a great issue, Walter Cronkite was sent to Vietnam to report personally from Saigon. Cronkite, the
most respected TV journalist in America, went on air and told the American people that there was no light at the end of the tunnel and that the war was far from over. Journalists had turned decisively against the war after the Tet Offensive.

**Nixon’s Vietnamization Policy & Impact of the Pentagon Papers**

After the Tet Offensive, President Johnson refused to send more soldiers to Vietnam on General Westmoreland’s request and appointed another commander of military units, General Abrams, who started to work on a new strategy that would give more responsibility to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. When Richard Nixon was elected president in January 1969, he utilized Johnson’s idea and prepared a strategy that was based on a gradual withdrawal of combat troops and giving training to ARVN soldiers so they could eventually fight the war by themselves. He also precipitously increased the air war. This plan became known as Vietnamization and took seven years (Anderson, 2011. p. 59). It was during these years from 1969-1973 that the American People, with the support of the Media, turned against the war.

The release of the Pentagon Papers, a secret study made in 1967 by Department of Defence to analyze “U.S. political and military involvement in Vietnam from 1945 to 1967” (History.com Staff, 2011), made things worse! It was never supposed to be seen by the public, but Daniel Ellsberg, one of the analysts who had turned against the war, decided that it was only fair to show Americans what was really happening behind the doors of White House and Pentagon and that it did not always correspond with what the White House told the media.

The study showed that the Johnson Administration decided to enter an open military conflict months before the Tonkin Gulf incident, they even started bombarding North Vietnam. While the bombing was already taking place, in the media President Johnson was giving
statements that he was reluctant to start air attacks on North Vietnam. (Introduction to Pentagon Papers, 1971, p. 9-10).

Since the beginning of the Vietnam War, the presidents used the fear of Communists taking over a large part of the world as a reason for the involvement in Vietnam. However, in the Pentagon Papers, it was stated that they saw the South Vietnam and Saigon as a "suitable base for U.S. action." (Introduction to Pentagon Papers, 1971, p. 9)

When the Pentagon Papers were published, the American public were astonished that the government could have lied continuously about such a costly (10)* war for so long. Chief-of-staff in White House, R. J. Haldeman, said what many people thought after reading about Pentagon Papers: "You can't trust the government; you can't believe what they say; and you can't rely on their judgement. And the implicit infallibility of presidents, which has been an accepted thing in America, is badly hurt by this, because it shows that people do things the president wants to do even though it's wrong, and the president can be wrong."


When in 1975 the last soldier left South Vietnam, it was clear that American public was deeply affected and media reporting changed from objective to investigative. During Nixon's Vietnamization from 1969-1973, the media was decisively against the war.

10 Costly in lives and money.

Conclusion

In 448 BC., Aeschylus said: "In war, truth is the first casualty." Even though it is an old quote, it still remains to be true, especially in Vietnam War. The truth was being hidden by the U.S. government when decisions about the war were made behind the closed doors and falsehoods
were released into the media. When the Americans found out that not even the reason for the involvement in Vietnam was true, they felt betrayed. They realized that their government was not the best in the world and that American soldiers were sent to Vietnam not to help South Vietnamese, but to pursue their own interests.

It can now be accepted that the Media played a primary role in ending the war, that without media, government would have been able to send more troops or drop more bombs and possibly the war could have been won, or perhaps not.

The journalists could see with their own eyes what was actually happening in Vietnam and when they reported it, it created confusion because it just did not correspond with official statements. There were more and more ambiguous reports and statements and when the Pentagon Papers were published, it was clear that the government had not been telling the truth for a long time.

In conclusion, the media definitely played a part in changing America’s opinion and forced the U.S. Government to end a war it was never winning.

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Appendix 1

Rough Justice on a Saigon Street
Source: ADAMS, E. In: © 1968 World Wide Photos, 1.2. 1968. Dostupné z:

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