

JANA TOPPE

# Catering to the silent majority

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The My Lai massacre as a media challenge

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## 1. Introduction

In March 1968, the men of Charlie Company entered the village of My Lai under the command of First Lieutenant William Calley with the objective to ‘search and destroy’ the Viet Cong believed to reside there. The village was instead populated by unarmed South Vietnamese civilians, mostly women and children, who were then massacred by Charlie Company. The incident was kept under wraps by the military for a year until an investigative journalist, Seymour Hersh, uncovered the story in 1969.

The revelation of the My Lai cover-up and the expanding press coverage was not the watershed moment or turning point in press coverage as one may be tempted to think. I propose that although the media slowly began to make use of the lack of censorship during the Vietnam War, the ‘othering’ of who was believed to be the enemy - the Vietnamese in general – was dominant enough to dictate the hearts and minds of what Nixon referred to as the ‘silent majority’. This paper intends to show that despite the extremity of the events at My Lai, the press remained cautious about criticizing the war. While the critical content of broadcasts increased, the professional notion of objectivism in journalism as well as the deferential relationship to official sources remained.

In the first part, I will provide some background of the American media’s role in the Vietnam War after 1965 and the moments perceived to be turning points, pointing out the important aspects regarding media coverage and the respective administrations. I will attempt to examine some of the reasons for this kind of ‘othering’ of the enemy by referring to Judith Butler’s theory of ‘expendable lives’. The My Lai massacre will therefore be treated as a case study in the larger picture of media coverage during the war in Vietnam.

Then I will describe the difficult journey of uncovering the My

Lai massacre and the press' usage of this information. In order to provide an in-depth look at how one medium handled the information, I will analyze an article from the magazine *Time* that was published on Nov. 28, 1969. The article is an attempt to lay open the disturbing facts that became known through Seymour Hersh's investigative journalism, yet apologetic tones linger throughout the account, as will be shown in chapter 3.2. Clearly the article's author, who is not named, is torn between challenging the military procedure in Vietnam and searching for reasons to excuse the actions of the men belonging to Charlie Company.

Due to the limited space of this paper, detailed descriptions of the events at My Lai such as orders and procedures, the massacre's cover-up as well as the general make-up of Charlie Company will not be undertaken<sup>1</sup>.

## **2. Vietnam, the administrations and the media**

### **2.1 Bone of contention: media coverage of Cam Ne**

The Vietnam War was the first to be captured by television cameras and broadcast into every home. Opinions about the amount and quality of coverage are contradictory: some scholars state that the media's portrayal of the war was one-dimensional with a focus on atrocities, while others contend that the media sanitized the horrific reality of war. The respective administrations had been frequently troubled by the media's treatment of events. A good example of this is the incident at Cam Ne, which occurred during Lyndon B. Johnson's term. On August 3, 1965, marines entered the hamlet of Cam Ne, ordered to eradicate Viet Cong troops, who – as CBS correspondent Morley Safer reported – had already deserted the village. The orders to destroy the village persisted, and the CBS camera team captured the marines torching huts. Safer commented on the action's precarious nature, criticizing

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<sup>1</sup> Michal R. Belknap gives a explicit illustration of training, environmental influence and group cohesion regarding this unit.

that “to a Vietnamese peasant whose home means a lifetime of backbreaking labor, it will take more than presidential promises to convince him that we are on his side.”<sup>2</sup> This news coverage infuriated the administration, and President Johnson is said to have angrily insulted CBS president Frank Stanton repeatedly. The administration actually, and unsuccessfully, tried to pressure CBS into removing Stanton from his position. Criticism was therefore not directed at the war itself but much rather at the network for showing these disturbing images.<sup>3</sup>

The problem of differentiating soldiers from civilians already came to the fore here, foreshadowing the horrors to come less than three years later at the hamlet of My Lai. Safer’s report was disturbing to audiences, since it presented a break from the television coverage of the war up to this point – magazines such as *Newsweek* and *Life* had offered more critical reports and imagery of civilian casualties, but television had pretty much steered clear of this. However, American soldiers were not portrayed as perpetrators. When South Vietnamese soldiers were shown abusing captured Viet Cong soldiers, the GIs were shown ‘merely’ as accomplices who stood by. At the same time, stories of GIs warning villagers of an impending attack were circulated (even by Safer’s CBS team), implying that the soldiers were going out of their way to protect civilians, and thereby blaming combat itself, not the soldiers’ individual volition, for the atrocities.<sup>4</sup>

What the media coverage of Cam Ne managed to do was to deface the image of war that had been upheld for some time: “War was no longer a glorious distant thing; it was American

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<sup>2</sup> as cited in Huebner, Andrew J. "Rethinking American Press Coverage of the Vietnam War, 1965 - 1968." *Journalism History* 31.3 (2005): 154.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *ibid.* and Kinnard, Douglas. *The War Managers* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1977), 129.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Huebner *Rethinking* 154 and Kinnard *War Managers* 129 – 130.

boys burning down villages while you watched in your own living room.”<sup>5</sup>

## **2.2 Nixon, Agnew and the troubles of television**

The difficult relationship between the Nixon Administration and the media, especially television news, has been documented extensively. After the Tet Offensive of 1968, the press began featuring more critical installments on the war, greatly distressing Nixon. For instance, when CBS interviewed an American soldier in 1969 about the South Vietnamese army’s efficiency with the outcome that the latter appeared unskilled and untrustworthy, the President was enraged. This was considered counterproductive to the strategy of Vietnamization that had been announced only a few days prior. Between 1969 and 1972, Nixon repeatedly insisted that journalists merely depicted the problems of Vietnamization, ignoring all achievements; he accused the media of “hoping for U.S. failure and enemy success in Vietnam”<sup>6</sup>. Nixon’s ambiguous relationship with the media continued: on the one hand, the President recognized especially television to be the best medium to influence public opinion, while at the same time attempting to both intimidate the networks and decrease their credibility. Vice President Spiro T. Agnew supported this line of action by accusing the networks of a clear bias and stating that television only focused on a loud, protesting minority<sup>7</sup>. During the campaigns in Laos and Cambodia, Nixon even pressed his aides to steer clear of the media and refuse to support them: “Don’t help the bastards ever because they’re trying to stick the knife right in our groin. [...] I respect people that are trying to kill me

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<sup>5</sup> Kinnard *War Managers* 130.

<sup>6</sup> Pach, Chester. "Our Worst Enemy Seems to Be the Press": TV News, the Nixon Administration, and U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Vietnam, 1969 - 1973." *Diplomatic History* 34.3 (2010): 555.

<sup>7</sup> This was also in line with Nixon’s Silent Majority speech on November 3, during which he addressed the “great silent majority” (as cited in Pach *Enemy* 557) of Americans that supported the war in Vietnam and did not protest.

[...] (but) I don't give them the knife."<sup>8</sup> Especially after 1970, President Nixon's admonishing remarks give hints at the critical stance the media had taken after the Tet Offensive.<sup>9</sup>

Before 1968, the mainstream press was in line with the respective administration's viewpoint - not conveying an outright anti-war stance - but this does not mean that the news coverage was completely devoid of grisly images of GIs. The troublesome and confusing nature of the conflict was conveyed nonetheless before the Tet offensive, and reducing it by calling it all-over uncritical would not do this complex coverage justice. While the post-Tet years saw much more critical reporting, the years before were not whitewashed completely. For example, individual accounts of suffering, like interviews of wounded and emotionally traumatized GIs recounting the horrors of an ambush served to paint a more complete picture of the complexity of modern war.<sup>10</sup>

Not only was the Vietnam War the first televised conflict, it was also the first uncensored one: "(i)f journalists could get access to the North Vietnamese or the Vietcong, they were in theory free to report the war from both sides."<sup>11</sup> No official control of the media occurred during Vietnam, as opposed to the censorship that took place both during World War II and the Korean War. This does not mean, however, that there were absolutely no means of control. The media were often asked to withhold certain news, for example movement of troops or graphic depictions of casualties. Also, "(r)eporters whom the military leadership in Vietnam did not favor might be denied transportation to the countryside, official accreditation,

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<sup>8</sup> as cited in Pach *Enemy* 559.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *ibid.* 555 – 567

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Hallin, Daniel C. "The Media, the War in Vietnam, and Political Support: A Critique of the Thesis of an Oppositional Media." *The Journal of Politics* 46 (1984), 6 and Hallin, Daniel C. *We Keep America on Top of the World. Television Journalism and the Public Sphere*. New York: Routledge 1994, 102.

<sup>11</sup> Hallin, Daniel C. *The "Uncensored War". The Media and Vietnam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1986, 147.

interviews with commanders, or lodging at military bases.”<sup>12</sup> Many networks relied on information provided by the military and the administration, and information could be distorted or withheld. The military knew of a number of informal ways to influence news coverage even without official censorship. At the same time, the media often abided, and still do abide to this day, by certain guidelines of objectivity. *Washington Post* reporter Richard Harwood stated in retrospect that a journalist who is incapable of taking on a neutral stance cannot be considered a journalist. Proclaiming that it is the media’s duty to be objective especially in times of war, Harwood said:

[...] a reporter has an absolute duty to his craft to seek the discipline of detachment and neutrality. If he sees himself as an agent of American government, as a promoter of American policies, he ceases to be a journalist and becomes instead a propagandist.<sup>13</sup>

Several journalists have attacked the media for not informing the public in full, and for not being critical and challenging enough. *New York Times* reporter and Pulitzer Prize winner Neil Sheehan insisted that the media had been given much more credit for influencing events during the war than they actually deserved: “They were [...] much more ‘reactive’ than ‘originative’ – more reflective of sensed public attitude than responsible for creating new public attitudes towards the war.”<sup>14</sup> In a broad qualitative study of media content during the Vietnam War (see also appendix), Daniel C. Hallin showed for one that

(t)elelevision painted an almost perfectly one-dimensional image of the North Vietnamese and Vietcong as cruel, ruthless, and fanatical[...]. Just as television journalists often waived the strictures of objectivity to celebrate what was seen at the beginning of the war as a national consensus behind it, they also, much more consistently, waived them to denounce the enemies of that consensus [...].<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, the media adhered to their standard of not

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<sup>12</sup> Huebner *Rethinking* 152.

<sup>13</sup> as cited in Kinnard *War Managers* 134.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 135.

<sup>15</sup> Hallin *Uncensored War* 148.

releasing details on military operations until they had been officially released by Military Assistance Command. Still, none of the administrations involved in the Vietnam War took active steps to censor the media coverage, even though Lyndon B. Johnson is said to have considered the failure to impose any form of censorship at the beginning of the war a mistake.<sup>16</sup>

A turning point in the press coverage as well as public opinion is said to have occurred in 1968 during the Tet Offensive. Here, the power of the media and its figureheads becomes very clear. Well-known television reporter Walter Cronkite visited Vietnam during the Tet Offensive, and the report broadcast upon his return turned out to be shocking. Both Cronkite's fame and his theretofore supportive stance on the war meant that his statements upon returning from Vietnam would be of great importance. "(O)ne of America's most respected newscasters"<sup>17</sup> then stated that this war was unwinnable, and the United States should try to withdraw from it as soon as possible.<sup>18</sup>

### **2.3 Expendable lives: media dehumanization**

Due to the fact that for so long, the North Vietnamese had been depicted as ruthless, brutal and terroristic enemy by the media, the public came to view them as a dehumanized 'other'<sup>19</sup>. This type of depiction manages to create an image of an entity devoid of emotions and reason, thereby negating the enemy's belonging to the human sphere in general.<sup>20</sup> Daniel C. Hallin describes the mindset of media coverage before 1968 as binary, thinking in terms of good (the U.S. army) fighting evil (the North Vietnamese enemy). The change that took place did not in fact result in an altered mindset regarding this dichotomy,

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Kinnard *War Managers* 127, 132; Hallin *Oppositional Media* 5 - 7.

<sup>17</sup> Kinnard *War Managers* 130.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> This concept of 'othering' could also be further analyzed by applying Edward Said's framework of Orientalism.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Hallin *Uncensored War* 158.

but rather in a faltering of “the conviction that the forces of good would inevitably prevail”<sup>21</sup>. Things began to change in 1967, when a basic disagreement over U.S. strategy in Vietnam called into question the general efficaciousness of the military presence. An escalation of military action in Vietnam was decided upon to meet the challenge of the altered way of fighting (larger battles took the place of the U.S. army’s usual ‘search and destroy’ operations because the North Vietnamese began to gather larger numbers of troops south of the DMZ), and especially after Tet<sup>22</sup>, the television coverage began to view the prospect of increased American casualties critically. The media’s skeptical stance was further enhanced by the general dissonance within the country regarding the war in Vietnam. The media gave voice to the division within the Pentagon, the country, and its own institutions with regards to the war. Moreover, the declining morale of the troops became public when strained soldiers showed an obvious lack of enthusiasm in interviews.<sup>23</sup> The whole country had become divided, and when “Vietnam [...] entered the Sphere of Legitimate Controversy, [...] the administration could no longer expect to benefit consistently from consensus journalism.”<sup>24</sup> Despite this division of beliefs, the depiction of the ‘enemy’ remained a difficult issue.

The method of ‘othering’ and dehumanizing described by Hallin with regards to the depiction of the North Vietnamese surely served to influence the way the public generally viewed the people in this far away, Southeast Asian country, no matter if they were South or North Vietnamese. In her essay “Precarious Life”, Judith Butler develops the concept of *expendable lives*. While Butler’s essay was inspired by the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the general mechanism of

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<sup>21</sup> Hallin *Uncensored War* 158.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel C. Hallin refers to the news appearance of the Tet Offensive as “a dramatic and disastrous turn of events.” (ibid. 168)

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Ibid. 160 – 162, 166.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 162.

delegitimizing the enemy can be applied to any other conflict and the respective media depiction. Butler states that the suffering of the 'other' is usually negated either by the lack of images thereof or, if images exist (such as in the case of My Lai), by the wrong type of representation of the matter. In the course of depicting the enemy as a nonhuman 'other', it is established "what will and will not be human, what will be a livable life, what will be a grievable death."<sup>25</sup> This describes perfectly the outcome of the dehumanizing depiction of the Vietnamese especially during the early stages of the war. When it did come to revealing the atrocities committed by American soldiers, and even photographic proof was delivered, the reactions were not as ultimately strong as one would like to surmise.

The revelation of the My Lai massacre caused outrage and revulsion at home and across the globe. American doves considered both the massacre and its cover-up proof that "America's Vietnam policy was fatally flawed"<sup>26</sup>, an opinion they shared with critics across the world. Both allies and 'enemies' reacted strongly to the news. Communist countries condemned the incident, accusing the American military of Nazi-like war crimes (this was proclaimed in a letter signed by 24 Soviet intellectuals, among them composer Dmitry Shostakovich). In Great Britain, for instance, the news of the massacre received front page coverage and caused a public outcry. Americans in support of the American presence in Vietnam, the so-called hawks, were not so much touched by the incident. The killing of civilians was often viewed as a necessary evil, an "inevitable by-product of warfare"<sup>27</sup> that was to become known as 'collateral damage'. Furthermore, many

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<sup>25</sup> Butler, Judith. "Precarious Life". Judith Butler ed. *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. New York: Verso 2004, 146.

<sup>26</sup> Belknap, Michal R. *The Vietnam War on Trial. The My Lai Massacre and the Court-Martial of Lieutenant Calley*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas 2002, 129.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 130.

hawks began to question the evidence, asking whether the massacre had actually taken place, and thereby downplaying its significance. The Vietnam War itself was often blamed for the atrocities, rather than the soldiers of Charlie Company, which also led to flaming support of William Calley, who many believed should not be on trial.<sup>28</sup>

How the massacre was uncovered and whether the media's treatment of the war really changed will be discussed by drawing on the coverage of the My Lai massacre as an example in the following chapter.

### **3. Uncovering the atrocities of My Lai**

As stated earlier, there is a common misconception among scholars that the media used the My Lai massacre as a means of rallying up the public against the war. The reality of it looks different; there was not enough media attention paid to the event to speak of sensationalizing media coverage. Before delving into the actual unveiling of the My Lai cover-up by members of the press, it is important to understand how the incident was brought to light in the first place. In order to do this, I will take a step back and look at events that occurred in Vietnam as well as in the United States.

After the massacre, the U.S. Army went to great lengths to hide the events from other Americans. However, the Vietnamese already knew, and this knowledge fueled communist propaganda. The Viet Cong exploited the incident for their own means all the while "killing plenty civilians themselves"<sup>29</sup>. The man involved in revealing the events to the American public was Ron Ridenhour, an ex-GI, who had heard members of Charlie Company bragging about the incident at My Lai and also saw the desolate and eerily silent landscape of the village from a helicopter. During a trip with a long-range

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Belknap *Trial* 129 – 131.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 80.

reconnaissance unit he heard eyewitness accounts of the massacre, and continued to gather information. For fear of his own safety, he didn't carry written notes. After Ridenhour was discharged and returned home to Phoenix, AZ, he was set on revealing the atrocities. Seymour Hersh makes a point of insisting that Ridenhour was a decorated, respectable GI with no history of antiwar protests and with a strong sense of morality.<sup>30</sup>

He wanted things to become known because

“(a)s far as I was concerned, it was a reflection on me, on every American, on the ideals we supposedly represent. It completely castrated the whole picture of America.”<sup>31</sup>

Together with his former high school teacher Arthur A. Orman, Ridenhour decided in March 1969 to approach the respective government agencies, requesting an investigation. They sent letters to Congress and President Nixon, detailing the information Ridenhour had gathered, making sure to point out that these were accounts he had heard, that he had not actually witnessed any of this. Personal interest in the letter was taken by two men: Representatives Morris Udall (a liberal from Arizona) and the South Carolina conservative L. Mendel Rivers, who decided to place pressure on the Army. However, by the time they took action, the Army had already received six Congressional referrals drawing on Ridenhour's letter, and was now forced to investigate.<sup>32</sup>

### **3.1 The media's role in publishing the massacre – a tale of hesitancy and caution**

Lieutenant William Calley Jr. was pulled out of Vietnam abruptly in June 1969 with special orders to report to DC (he actually thought he was going to be awarded a medal there).

This is where the first public hint of the My Lai massacre was

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Hersh, Seymour M. *My Lai 4. A Report on the Massacre and its Aftermath*. New York: Random House 1970, 104 - 105.

<sup>31</sup> As cited in *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *ibid.* 106 –116.

given: the Army's public information office in Fort Benning issued a rather unspecific press release on September 5 about charges against Lt. Calley. This release included no details about the accusation of murdering 109 Vietnamese civilians. While some reporters attempted to obtain more information, they remained unsuccessful.<sup>33</sup> The flood of questions that the Pentagon had initially expected never occurred. The first mention of murder is made on NBC's Huntley-Brinkley Report on September 10, 1969, where they speak of "premeditated murder of a number of South Vietnamese civilians"<sup>34</sup>.

All the while, Ron Ridenhour watched the beginning press coverage with concern, since the Army was not publicizing any details about the Calley case. In fact, on October 13, 1969, Ridenhour received a letter from the Army, informing him that the hearing on Calley's murder charges would begin that month, and urging him to keep quiet: "It is not appropriate to report details of the allegations to the news media. Your continued cooperation in this matter is acknowledged."<sup>35</sup> Unable, and unwilling, to continue, and with his agent Michael Cunningham disinclined to supersede Army 'orders' to keep quiet, Ridenhour finally decided to turn over his file to a newspaper reporter. This man was Ben Cole of the *Phoenix Republic*, who then missed to report on the facts he was given because he allegedly fell ill with a bad cold ("I was a sick baby"<sup>36</sup>). A reporter who had stumbled upon some details on his own while investigating Calley's case, Charles Black of the *Columbus Enquirer*, held off his report because he did not want to embarrass the Army. Instead, he chose to wait for them to go public with the case first.<sup>37</sup>

The press lay quiet even with frequent leaks to the *New*

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Oliver, Kendrick. *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press 2006, 39 – 41, Hersh *My Lai 4* 117 – 118 and 129 – 130.

<sup>34</sup> as cited in Oliver *Massacre* 40.

<sup>35</sup> as cited in Hersh *My Lai 4* 131.

<sup>36</sup> as cited in *ibid.* 132.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *ibid.* 130 – 133.

*York Times* and the *Washington Post*. While these outlets received some tips, no news stories were written until investigative journalist Seymour Hersh was tipped off by a phone call on October 22. Hersh began investigating, and set out to speak with Calley in November 1969, from whom he was given surprising amounts of information. Due to his independent status, Hersh was not inclined to ignore the rumors he had heard. Since he was not part of a large media corporation and had also not served as a reporter in Vietnam (in fact, he was opposed to American involvement), he

suffered little from the jaundiced ethics and divided loyalties which kept more experienced war correspondents passive and discreet before the manifold cruelties that they witnessed. At the same time, however, Hersh represented the more reputable end of radical investigative journalism.<sup>38</sup>

Having worked as the *Associated Press*' Pentagon correspondent for some years and even as Eugene McCarthy's press secretary during the presidential primaries in 1968, and due to the fact that "his writing style conformed to the 'objective' register favoured [sic!] by the mainstream media"<sup>39</sup>, Hersh should have had the best credentials to get his story out into the open.<sup>40</sup>

Interestingly, Hersh had a hard time publishing his story. *Life* and *Look* magazines both turned him down. Hersh then gave his story to a small Washington based news agency, the *Dispatch News Service*, which initially offered it to fifty newspapers; more than thirty, among them many of the nation's leading, newspapers published the story the following day. The *New York Times* was the only one of those to go ahead and investigate further and on location in South Vietnam. Their correspondent Henry Kamm then talked and bribed his way through the countryside until he found some survivors from My Lai, which led to a dispatch on survivors telling of 567 men, women and children being massacred by American soldiers. The

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<sup>38</sup> Oliver *Massacre* 41.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 42.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

story ran on the front page of the paper's Monday edition.<sup>41</sup> Initially though, many newspapers were skeptical of My Lai: the *Washington Post*, for example, published a Pentagon statement claiming Kamm's report to be an exaggeration, and only four newspapers featured editorial comments on the massacre. Recuperated from his cold, Ben Cole came out and published an article on Ridenhour's role in the investigation and showed that the Pentagon had confirmed Ridenhour's letter as the stimulus for the investigation.<sup>42</sup>

Hersh followed up his first dispatch with more eyewitness accounts, and on November 18, the pictorial proof of the incident was finally announced. An ex-GI named Ron Haeberle informed his friend, journalist Joseph Eszterhas of *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, that he was in possession of photographs of the massacre. Haeberle had been an Army journalist and photographer and had accompanied Charlie Company on that fateful day in March of 1968. He had taken black and white photographs with his Army issued camera and color images with his private camera. While the black and white images were confiscated by the Army at the beginning of the Calley trial, he had kept his private photos. Haeberle had actually written a "glowing account of the operation for the 11<sup>th</sup> Brigade newspaper"<sup>43</sup>, where he told of Charlie Company taking down an enemy stronghold, killing fourteen Viet Cong. Much later, the military photographer and reporter stated that he had not spoken up sooner because at this point in time he still thought the actions at My Lai were representative of how war was fought. Once Eszterhas began investigating, Haeberle was warned by Captain Aubrey Daniels of Fort Benning not to publish the images – an open admission that these pictures were in fact authentic. This was all Eszterhas needed to be convinced and to go ahead with the publication of the photographs. *The*

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. Oliver *Massacre* 41 – 42, Hersh *My Lai* 4 133 – 135.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Hersh *My Lai* 4 135 – 136.

<sup>43</sup> Belknap *Trial* 91.

*Cleveland Plain Dealer* published Haeberle's photographic proof of the massacred men, women and children on November 20, 1969. On that same day, Seymour Hersh's interviews with Michael Terry and Michael Bernhard of Charlie Company became available.<sup>44</sup>

Even after the publication of images and eyewitness reports, the media remained cautious and rarely featured editorial comments. There was only little investigative reporting, and only few attempts to uncover the full truth and locate former members of Charlie Company. Hersh found Paul Meadlo, who had been flown out of Vietnam early after stepping on a landmine. Deeply disturbed by what he had done, he cursed at William Calley while waiting for the medivac helicopter, telling him "God will punish you."<sup>45</sup> Meadlo had not only been a crucial witness in the investigation, he was also very much willing to discuss the events openly. He was interviewed during the CBS evening news with Walter Cronkite, a prime time program, on November 24, 1969. His testimony came as a shock to viewers hearing Meadlo state that he "went into a village and killed everybody"<sup>46</sup>. It was not until then that reporters began to actively seek and find – or maybe one can say, they now actually *dared* to look for - accounts of American atrocities in South Vietnam. After Meadlo's TV appearance, conservative and liberal newspapers alike began to judge the massacre harshly. While conservative newspapers often tried to evade, the weekly magazines like *Newsweek*, *Time* and *Life* ran cover stories and recounted the prejudice of GIs toward the Vietnamese. Seymour Hersh's reports are said to have "ignited [...] (a) firestorm"<sup>47</sup>; suddenly, newspapers and magazines were flooded with accounts and images of the incident at My Lai. Hersh in fact went on to publish a book on the topic, meeting

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. Hersh *My Lai* 4 137 – 138, Belknap *Trial* 91 – 92.

<sup>45</sup> as cited in Belknap *Trial* 88.

<sup>46</sup> as cited in *ibid.* 121.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

with representatives of the Pentagon who, albeit realizing they could not prevent him from publishing, issued a confidential memorandum urging the military to “cut this guy’s water off at the Pentagon end.”<sup>48</sup> Hersh’s book *Cover-Up* was published in 1972 nonetheless.<sup>49</sup>

The media’s hesitancy regarding this topic is particularly interesting in light of the fact that the Vietnam Conflict was the first uncensored war. In an interview with *Democracy Now*, Seymour Hersh remembered the media’s caution accordingly:

There’s always a disconnect [...] between the bad stuff that goes on, that everyone knows goes on, and what I guess you could call the mainstream press wants to write about.<sup>50</sup>

In his extensive study on the question of an oppositional media after the Tet Offensive<sup>51</sup>, Daniel C. Hallin attempts to examine whether the media for one took on a different stance towards political authority, and secondly if they began to apply different journalistic standards. After comparing and contrasting the content of news shows between 1968 and 1976, he concludes that there was no

dramatic shift in the basic ideology and newsgathering routines of American journalism. The routines of objective journalism - routines which are incompatible with an actively oppositional conception of the journalists' role - seem to have persisted more or less unchanged throughout the Vietnam period.<sup>52</sup>

The media's reliance on information from official sources as well as their hesitancy, if not avoidance, of any outright judgments of official policy and statements remained. It can be seen that the media's behavior during the uncovering of the

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<sup>48</sup> as cited in Belknap *Trial* 121.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Kinnard *War Managers* 127; Belknap *Trial* 109, 120 - 121, 149.

<sup>50</sup> Goodman, Amy. “Calley Apologizes for 1968 My Lai Massacre”, *democracynow.org*, originally aired August 24, 2009, accessed 2 September 2011.

[http://www.democracynow.org/2009/8/24/calley\\_apologizes\\_for\\_1968\\_my\\_lai](http://www.democracynow.org/2009/8/24/calley_apologizes_for_1968_my_lai).

<sup>51</sup> Hallin, Daniel C. “The Media, the War in Vietnam, and Political Support: A Critique of the Thesis of an Oppositional Media.” *The Journal of Politics* 46 (1984), 2 - 24.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 6.

incidents at My Lai was by no means an exception, nor did the coverage of this massacre change the state of things.<sup>53</sup>

The professional dogma of objective journalism in American media is marked by both "disengagement from active political involvement" and a "relatively passive role of transmitting information to the public"<sup>54</sup>. Only the reemergence of investigative journalism in the wake of Watergate breaks with this tradition of objectivity, yet, as Hallin shows, this practice played a rather small role during the Vietnam conflict.<sup>55</sup> However, if it weren't for journalists such as Seymour Hersh, who investigated leads and hints none of his colleagues wanted to follow, the My Lai massacre might not have received the attention it did. Even if this investigative practice played a small role, one man practicing it managed to make history.

### **3.2 Source: "Nation: The My Lai Massacre" - *Time*, Nov. 28, 1969**<sup>56</sup>

The author reveals himself<sup>57</sup> as part of the media tradition of dehumanizing the enemy, as has been described in chapter 2, when he describes My Lai as "a hamlet in Viet Cong-infested territory"<sup>58</sup>. In the course of recounting the incident, he makes sure to denounce the Vietnamese eyewitnesses that have told the tale by insisting that all of them are "pro-V.C.". Not only does this serve to stay in line with the hesitant media coverage of the war that I have described up to this point, but it also further hints at an apprehensiveness of confirming the innocence of the victims of My Lai. In the same paragraph, however, the author manages to speak of the act as an "atrocious"

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<sup>53</sup> Cf. Hallin *Oppositional Media* 6; Hallin *Television Journalism* 141 – 143..

<sup>54</sup> Hallin *Oppositional Media* 10.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. *ibid.* 10 – 12.

<sup>56</sup> "Nation: The My Lai Massacre". *Time* 94.22 (Nov. 28, 1969), accessed Oct. 10 2011.

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,840403,00.html>

<sup>57</sup> I will refer to the author as masculine for purely practical reasons; this by no means an assumption or inference.

<sup>58</sup> All quotes in this chapter will stem from the archived *Time* article if not otherwise specified.

and of the war as “already well known for its particular savagery”. There is an obvious unease in categorizing the event – the author might be seen as a representative of the difficulty many media outlets felt at this point when it came to reporting both sides of the war, a “dark and bloody” as well as a heroic, pro-American side.

The author attempts not only to recount the events but much rather sheds light on the soldiers’ general situation in the area. He speaks of “a ‘fortified’ hamlet whose bricked-up houses served as bunkers for marauding V.C. cadres”, in an area where, “(a)lmost from the moment it arrived”, Charlie Company “suffered daily casualties”. The author speaks of “mayhem”, “mines and booby traps” and the soldiers “lost”, “killed” and “injured”. His insistence upon the death toll may not serve as an apology, but can definitely be seen as a contextualization and explanation of the soldiers’ behavior at My Lai. Even when reporting the accounts of survivors who had spoken with news teams at the refugee camp of Son My, the author never fails to mention that these were “inhabitants, who had a long record of sheltering Viet Cong”, as if to find a reason behind the orders given to butcher the hamlet of My Lai.

In his rather detailed accounts of Charlie Company’s course of action in the hamlet, the author does refer to the incident as “madness”, and hints at the soldiers’ irreverence when he mentions that they “broke for lunch” between shooting a “clump of bodies” here and a “pile of bodies” there. Furthermore, he insists that not all soldiers took part in the action and gives information on several members of Charlie Company refusing to carry out the orders. A full paragraph detailing “other American atrocities in Viet Nam” (“a nighttime rampage in Xuan Ngoc in which two women were raped and a family of five killed”, “the kidnap-rape-murder of a young girl by four G.I.s in 1966”) is then rounded off by insisting that atrocities occur on both sides: “such incidents are only a small

part of the mosaic of brutality for which both sides are responsible. Terror is a principal Viet Cong tactic.” The author knows the Viet Cong’s body counts as well as the number of kidnapped and wounded. He mentions that “allies have taken to such tactics too, though on a more limited scale.”

Finally, the author denounces the attempts of anti-war protesters to use the incident at My Lai as a means to “support their theme”, by saying that "Americans and others have committed brutal acts in other wars as well, wars with a deeper outline and purpose". This is both a criticism of the obscure reasoning behind the Vietnam War as well as an apology of the actions of soldiers. My Lai, he says, will be hard on the American public to come to terms with, yet he insists such an incident to be different from political terror when he calls such events "the aberrations of soldiers under stress". Here the author once again emphasizes the righteousness of American soldiers, possibly in an attempt to remain objective, and to refrain from making generalizations.

The opposing strategies of depiction that can be seen in this article alone appear to be representative of the media’s unease at the time, as has been shown in my preceding case study of the My Lai coverage. In this article alone, the author shows divergent attitudes towards the war, the massacre, and the soldiers.

#### **4. Conclusion**

After the Tet Offensive in 1968 more journalists seized the opportunity of not being bound by official censorship, delivering more critical reports – especially journalists in Vietnam, at the forefront of events. However, the media practice was not revolutionized. Caution and hesitance remained. The Vietnam War is often referred to as not just the first but possibly the only truly uncensored war. The conflicts between the respective administrations and the media during the

American presence in Southeast Asia show that even though the media's treatment of the matter has been contested by journalists in retrospect (see p. 6 - 7 of this paper), any censorship that might have taken place occurred out of professional considerations. Some journalists decided not to report on specific topics because they wanted to wait for an official military report, others refused to 'embarrass' their country's leadership. At any rate, these media representatives would have been free to report on the topics – which might not be said about the embedded journalists during Operation "Iraqi Freedom", as scholars have claimed. In fact, a study performed by Michael Pfau et al. proved that the embedded coverage did produce both decontextualized and biased reports. The reports focused on small-scale events, and personalized tales, instead of representing the bigger picture that would allow viewers to relate the events to the overall objective of the military engagement.<sup>59</sup>

This resulted in more favorable and positive coverage than in comparable conflicts, for example the Vietnam War. In order to attain a more complete picture of the war, the public then had to refer to several vantage points instead of relying on what seemed most plausible and was lauded by the Pentagon as the most reliable source – the journalists in the field with a military unit. The reports of journalists stationed in Baghdad and independent journalists travelling across the country to observe the events would provide a wider range of social locations and viewpoints to establish a more balance picture than the mere reliance on the report of embedded journalists, as Andrew M. Lindner suggests in his article "Among the Troops: Seeing the Iraq War Through Three Journalistic Vantage Points". One may argue at this point that it might generally be advisable to gather

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<sup>59</sup> Pfau, Michael, Michel Haigh, Mitchell Gettle, Michael Donnelly, Gregory Scott, Dana Warr, and Elaine Wittenberg. "Embedding Journalists in Military Combat Units: Impact on Newspaper Story Frames and Tone". *J&MC Quarterly* 81.4 (2004), 74 – 84.

news from more than one source, and it would have to be further analyzed whether or not relying on one source for reports from the war has ever proven a wise strategy in the past. Without any means of comparison with other wars, Lindner's claim<sup>60</sup> does not really stand. What this does make rather clear, however, is that in order to attain the fullest possible information about a conflict, the public always ought to consult several sources. Although there was no official censorship during the Vietnam War, the media often withheld information out of the notion of objectivity or out of sheer deference to authority, proving that viewers or readers would have to review more than one source. The same goes for Operation Iraqi Freedom: while the Pentagon may very well have hoped for biased reports when embedding journalists, other reports still offered different viewpoints. One cannot say that there was any kind of media blackout, and as usual in a media landscape without full censorship, the public itself is responsible for attaining the full information it might seek.

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<sup>60</sup> Lindner, Andrew M. "Among the Troops: Seeing the Iraq War Through Three Journalistic Vantage Points." *Social Problems* 56.1 (2009), 21 – 22.

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6. Appendix (Source: Hallin *Oppositional Media* 8 -10)

**TABLE 1**

DIRECTION OF TELEVISION JOURNALISTS' EDITORIAL COMMENTS  
ON MAJOR ACTORS OF THE VIETNAM WAR (PERCENTAGES DOWN)

PERIOD	FAVORABILITY TO ACTION OR POLICY OF:			
	ADMINIS- TRATION, SUPPORTERS	SOUTH VIETNAM GOVT.	DOVE CRITICS OF WAR	NORTH VIETNAM, NLF
<b>Pre-Tet</b>				
Favorable	11	2	0	0
Comment or Interpretation	78.6%	50.0	0.0	0.0
Unfavorable	3	2	2	20
	21.4	50.0	100.0	100.0
<b>Tet</b>				
Favorable	0	0	0	2
	0.0	0.0	0.0	40.0
Unfavorable	6	3	3	3
	100.0	100.0	100.0	60.0
<b>Post-Tet</b>				
Favorable	23	17	7	10
	28.8	29.8	31.8	25.6
Unfavorable	57	40	15	29
	71.3	70.2	68.2	74.4

*Note:* Pre-Tet period is 20 Aug. 1965–30 Jan. 1968 (about thirty-six months); Tet, 31 Jan.–31 March 1968 (three months); post-Tet, 1 April 1968–26 Jan. 1973 (about fifty-one months).

**TABLE 2**

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE REFERENCES  
TO DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH VIETNAM

	POSITIVE REFERENCES	NEGATIVE REFERENCES
Prior to Tet Offensive	4.5	6.0
Tet Offensive	0.0	0.5
After Tet Offensive	3.5	37.0

*Note:* Figures are raw frequencies. For dates and relative lengths of periods see note to table 1.

**TABLE 3**  
POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE REFERENCES  
TO MORALE OF U.S. TROOPS

	POSITIVE REFERENCES	NEGATIVE REFERENCES
Prior to Tet Offensive	4.0	0.0
Tet Offensive	0.0	1.0
After Tet Offensive	2.5	14.5

*Note:* Figures are raw frequencies. For dates and relative lengths of periods see note to table 1.

**TABLE 4**  
PEOPLE SPEAKING OR QUOTED BY REPORTERS  
IN TELEVISION COVERAGE OF VIETNAM

	PRIOR TO TET OFFENSIVE	TET OFFENSIVE	AFTER TET OFFENSIVE	TOTAL
Administration	59	4	250	310
Representatives, Supporters <sup>a</sup>	26.3%	13.8	28.4	27.5
South Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian Govt. Officials	8 3.6	0 0.0	33 3.8	41 3.6
Critics of Administration Policy <sup>b</sup>	10 4.5	7 27.6	230 26.1	247 21.9
North Vietnamese, NLF, Officials	4 1.8	1 3.4	35 4.0	41 3.6
American Officers and GIs in the Field <sup>c</sup>	110 49.1	11 41.4	152 17.3	273 24.2
Others	34 15.2	4 13.8	179 20.3	216 19.1
Total	224 100.0	26 100.0	880 100.0	1128 100.0

<sup>a</sup> Includes domestic but not foreign supporters of administration policy.

<sup>b</sup> Includes both "doves" and "hawks," though most are "doves." Includes only domestic critics of administration policy.

<sup>c</sup> Also includes lower-level civilian officials, e.g., pacification advisors.

*Note:* Figures—including frequencies—may not add to totals because of rounding. Frequencies are rounded because of weighting (see note 4 in the text).