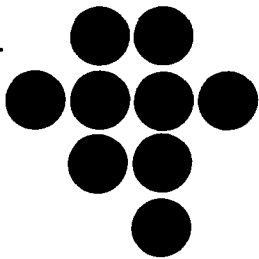


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March 15, 1990

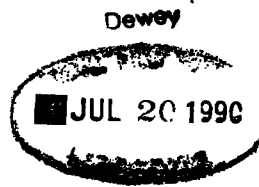
Seminar Notes

**MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
COMMUNICATIONS FORUM**

"Can Journalists Cut Through the Fog of War?"

March 15, 1990

Seminar Notes



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Walter V. Robinson, The Boston Globe

Carla Robbins, Nieman Fellow, Harvard University

Juan Vasquez, CBS Latin America correspondent

Antonio J. J. Botelho, Rapporteur

This session of the forum brought together several journalists to discuss the problems faced by the press in covering recent military actions by the United States.

The first speaker was **Walter V. Robinson**, Washington correspondent, the Boston Globe. **Robinson** began by saying that he got to Panama only two days after the invasion, because the White House notified the press only a couple of hours before the invasion took place. This late notification was just the beginning of the difficulty journalists had in covering the Panamanian invasion. Once in Panama, the U.S. military initially kept him and other journalists as virtual POWs, making it difficult for them to get any news other than the ones told by the military.

For **Robinson** the real question is whether we can cut through the fog of anything. War is just a little more different than your average story. In this case there were steps taken that made it very difficult for the press to do its job in Panama. Four reasons explain why that happened. First, people in government do not generally like to have the press looking over their shoulder when they are doing their job. Second, the military really feared for the safety of the journalists there. The military was expecting 30 journalists and more than 300 showed up. Third, there seemed to be a power struggle going on between the Pentagon and the field commander in Panama, General Steiner. Fourth, the military did not care whether or not the press got access.

There were three categories of journalist there. Those that were on the scene, who were mostly pinned down in one hotel and of whom some were taken hostage. The second group was the Pentagon pool. The pool concept was established by the Pentagon after the Grenada invasion. The fatal flaw in the deployment of this pool by the Pentagon was that they did not get there until after the action began. There is no reason why they did not do otherwise. Moreover, once they got there they were not allowed near the story, but were just given briefings and allowed to watch CNN! The pool was probably too large (16 journalists) for that operation and the colonel in charge did not have enough authority on the scene to get them near the fighting. The third group, of which **Robinson** was part, was the largest group composed of about 200 journalists who got there much after the fact. This group was kept in barracks on a U.S. airfield, with little communications to the outside and inhospitable lodging conditions. By Christmas eve the Army persuaded a large block of journalists to return home by arguing that there were no accommodations for them and that their safety could not be assured in the downtown area. It was only by Saturday that most of the press had free access to Panama City. By that time there was very little fighting left to see.

The American public was the big loser because it did not get a straight story about the invasion and its aftermath. In fact, **Robinson** said, we may never know for sure about a number of things. First, the number of civilian casualties and how did they die. Second, whether the looting could have been prevented or not. Third, journalists death or blessures in cross-fire, even between American troops, could have been avoided. Fourth, there was little anticipation of persistent low level resistance for a week or two. There is some evidence that the American military used an extraordinary amount of firepower on minor

targets. Fifth, we know little how well the US troops performed in battle. We know only that they did well in the mop up operations. Sixth, there were a number of public relations miscues by the military. The first was that by keeping the press away, the press assumed the worse. Once the press was unleashed into town, it found with surprise that a majority of the population was overjoyed by what had happened in spite of all the destruction. By keeping the press under the lid, the military hoped to have an immensely favorable story. In the process they missed a more favorable story. Finally, another DOD mistake was to issue gag orders to the troops not to talk to the press. There was also a lot of contradictory information from DOD and they kept ducking information about civilian casualties for a week, what only made the journalists more suspicious.

Robinson concluded with lessons from this experience. His major point was that although the pool arrangement could have worked better it is unlikely that it will get any better in the future. This is because the images of war are not very pretty, particularly on television. We have learned in Vietnam that the more television images the public sees the more public support for the action diminishes. And the public relations people at the DOD know that.

The next speaker was **Juan Vasquez**, CBS News' Latin American correspondent who is based in Miami. **Vasquez** presentation contrasted the coverage of Grenada and Panama, as he was involved in the coverage of both invasions.

Vasquez began with the Grenada invasion. Although nobody knew for certain that there was going to be an invasion, he flew into Barbados from Panama when rumors of potential action leaked. Yet, nobody told the press in Barbados when the invasion actually happened. In fact, the military essentially kept press out of Grenada for 48 hours. Even those journalists who got there before the invasion could not file because the only telex available was broken, and eventually the Navy took them hostage aboard one of its ships, after being enticed there as the only place to file in the island area. After 48 hours the Pentagon decided to take a pool of about 10 reporters to Grenada. The pool was taken in a bus by the military to two or three different places they wanted the journalists to see: a warehouse full of weapons, the place where Cuban prisoners were held, and out. The pool was in the island less than six hours. Back in Barbados two journalists of the pool were told to brief the other journalists. The next day the same exercise took place. Only this time they allowed people to stay in Grenada. It was only then that it was found out that: 1- several frogmen had died in an incompetent effort to rescue the Queen's representative on the island; 2- the Air Force had mistakenly bombed the only mental asylum in the island, and 3- that the most Cubans on the island were construction workers and put up little resistance. All the time the military never lied, but they also never told what they did not want reporters to know.

All of this contrasts with Panama, where there was finally a prearranged pool and a group of journalists were brought in. Most of the bad reporting in Grenada was due to the fact that the reporters writing articles did not know the place and did not have enough background.

Next Vasquez commented, from the safety perspective, how did the pool come into being and how did it work out. Networks put a lot of pressure to allow so many reporters in. He was already in place when the invasion occurred and was evacuated from the Marriot Hotel to the base where the pool of journalists was. Most networks have base organizations in countries like Panama that includes a driver and a car. So he was able to drive around town with greater freedom. But on Friday morning when they tried to get to the Holiday Inn, 8 miles on the other side of town, they first got shots from American troops and then were blocked by both U.S. forces and Panamanian Dignity battalions. It was also impossible to reach any hospital to check on casualties.

Vasquez asserted that it was very unsafe for journalists to stay in Panama City. There was a disorganized resistance and a total lack of law and order. U.S. soldiers did not do anything to stop the looting, because their orders were to just occupy strategic crossings in the downtown commercial area. The military played an ambiguous role in our evacuation of the Marriot Hotel. Even by late Friday things were not under control. There also seems to have been problems of discipline of U.S. soldiers. A couple of journalists were shot by U.S. forces GIs and one was killed. Moreover, all shops at the Marriot were looted, perhaps by US troops.

Vasquez concluded by giving an answer to the question: Is the press pool worth the effort or not? His answer was that any access is better than no access. The fighting in Panama was covered far better than in Grenada. The U.S. military are more forthright than U.S. civilian authorities. All one has to do is to keep in mind what they have not said.

The next speaker was Carla Robbins, former Latin America bureau chief of U.S News & World Report, and currently a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University. Robbins was not in Panama at the time of the invasion, but anticipated that it was likely to occur from the preceding train of events. From the outside, the most striking question has to do with the civilian casualties. She does not believe that there was intent on the part of the military to cover up the issue. Still it is inexplicable why it took 17 days for a major news organization to carry a story on it.

Robbins said that she did not think that an invasion is a legitimate way of making foreign policy, but that from having spent a long time in Panama, she could say that Noriega was the most illegitimate leader she ever saw and that he was very much hated by most Panamanians. Still it is a legitimate question to ask why we failed to get the numbers on the civilian casualties in a shorter period of time.

On the question of the looters, Robbins, said that Panama is more like Peoria than Latin America. The citizens kept asking American citizens to overthrow Noriega, which made her angry because it showed that the Panamanians did not want to get involved but wanted others to do the job and get killed. She did not expect any armed resistance at all. The fact that there was resistance it is another story that yet has to be covered. The Dignity battalions were not political organizations, they had been around for quite a while and were pretty scary, having shot several reporters over the years. But apparently there was some political content for their resistance, because they were not all looters and because they

resisted much longer than expected.

The bigger question is why we are not covering Panama now. The US invested a lot of American and Panamanian lives in this invasion, it systematically helped destroy the Panamanian economy over 2 1/2 years and what was not destroyed by that was flattened in the invasion. The US government is now talking of giving at least \$ 1 billion to Panama. The question is who are these guys we are giving this money to? G. Endara's only credential to be a politician, and the reason why he was chosen to run in the aborted election last May was that for 15 years he was protocol aid to a Madrid. The United States spent 40 years of policy in Panama trying to keep Madrid out of power because of his Nazi past. Endara in a way may represent a political movement that undermines American ideals of democracy. He is not anti-democratic, but rather an authoritarian populist. Giving blank checks is a bad idea. The after story is part of the fog war. It does not stop when the troops go back home.

For Robbins the best explanation why there has not been much coverage is that there is a sort of revisionism going on both in and Panama City. It says that history ended with Noriega. Noriega was the end of the dark ages, and he was evil, that is why the US had to invade. Now we are back to democracy. The problem is that there was not a democracy in Panama before Noriega.

Another point raised by Robbins was about the ambivalent relation between the press and the military. The best foreign correspondents are people who have served in the military and have a some technical knowledge that is helpful in covering a war because they can understand the military logic and the language better. There are no two groups that are less able to communicate effectively than military officers and journalists. The former as an institution is committed to secrecy and patriotism, they are true believers. Journalists are just the opposite, true skeptics. Military want to codify everything, and unfortunately politics does not work that way. An the military blames the press for making politics harder to understand and be put in a chain of command structure. Because of that they do not like the press, but have to put up with it because the military has civilian masters that say they have to be good to the press. In the end it is a stressful relationship that makes cutting through the fog of war even harder.

Robbins went on to talk about some of the challenges to do a good job. A major challenge is that Americans have not fought a war in their own soil for 130 years. The job of the reporter is to translate the emotions of the battlefield to the public. And journalists have a hard time doing that. Another challenge is to how humanize war for America where there are handrails everywhere. It is always dangerous in the Third World. Part of the job of cutting through the confusion is to show how people there make mundane adaptations and how that distorts people in the long run. El Salvador is scary because there are two many people in a small place. Journalist have to give attention on how terrifying it is to live under such conditions. Editors are in a way responsible for that. They want cameraman to get the firefight going on because that is where the drama is. So casualties of cameraman are much higher. But they fail to see the effect of the fight on the lives of local people because they do think Americans are not interested.

Robbins concluded with some comments on covering the military in the future. One is the role of the military as a statesman. For the longest time both Bush and the Joint Chiefs of Staff were not interested in the action in Panama. General Colin Powell came in as head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in October and in December the US invaded Panama and, in the meantime, the U.S. also scrambled the jets in the Philippines to support Cory Aquino. All of a sudden the US military got a lot more active. One of the reasons the US never wanted to get involved militarily in Panama was the fear of losing base rights in the Philippines and in other places. It may be that changes occurred because we have a more active military. Powell saw the big picture better. **Robbins** does not necessarily favor this more activist role for the military, but says it is necessary to pursue its coverage.

Finally, **Robbins** said that cutting through the fog of peace may be the big story coming up. The military which for the longest time did not want get involved in the war on drugs is really hot on it now. They are also really hot on things like Panama. The whole bureaucracy is on the move.

Question & Answer

The first question asked what kind of a feeling a journalist has in relation to a forthcoming coverage of a war, what kind of planning a journalist does to cover a war. **Vasquez** response was that he tried to get his organization to do that, to have a secure and open line to New York. The reason there were so few reporters into Panama when it happened was that before you could not get in Panama. Panama was requiring all journalists to get a special visa either in Mexico or Colombia. The real question was whether the place was safe, and those who were reluctant to leave the Marriot were taken hostages. You had to be an idiot not to realize that the Marriot was going to be the first place to be hit by the Panamanian Dignity battalions. His organization main concern was that once the action happened the journalist could file.

The next question asked if it would not be more appropriate to talk of a fog of foreign policy. **Robbins** response was that Bush is into surprises, leaving the news organizations scrambling to get the logistics, giving little time for them to really look into the issues of the fact taking place. **Robinson** agreed that Bush is more secretive than his predecessor, that he likes to keep things out of the public view. **Vasquez** added that military people do not want you to be there, but once they are dealing with you they tend to be more direct. **Robbins** commented that since World War II there is a changing relationship between journalists and the military. In World War II journalists wore uniforms, in Vietnam something like an uniform and there were rules; and today even though journalists are on the opposition, they still depend on people with technical knowledge. Journalists have a responsibility of knowing that the war news will affect people's lives.

The following question asked whether American journalists are ready to cover a story from the beginning. **Robbins'** response was that a lot of journalist do exactly that, like going into battles with the Nicaraguan contras. Twenty-three reporters were killed in Central America

and only 1 in the Middle East strife. People willing to do that are usually free lancers. Also because the editors of major news organizations are not willing to give their journalists the time to set up the context for doing this. Vasquez added it was possible to have done that. What the guys in the pool were asking in Panama was to go on patrol with the military, and the military obviously refused because they were there to fight not to protect reporters. They could have asked to go out on their own but they could not do that because they had never been to Panama before. There were few reporters in Panama because it was too dangerous. Guys on salary will not risk their lives unnecessarily.

The final question was: Because war is dangerous and editors want action coverage will the military provide the pictures? Vasquez answer was that the military will eventually learn to take pictures. The problem is that these will be censored pictures. Robbins remarked that nowadays the technology makes you expect to be there when it happens 24 hours a day. It has become really hard to cover a war on a 24-hour basis, but surely make use of censored tapes is not part of a solution to the problem.