

THESIS TITLE:

*THE CHANGING ROLE OF WAR CORRESPONDENTS IN
AUSTRALIAN TELEVISION NEWS AND CURRENT AFFAIRS
COVERAGE OF TWO CONFLICTS, VIETNAM (1966-1975)
AND IRAQ (2003)*

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SIGNED DECLARATION:

I hereby declare that this Masters thesis is my original work and does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university and that, to the best of my knowledge, it does not contain any materials previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text. Ethics approval (reference number: HE27FEB2004-MO2759) has been granted by Macquarie University to conduct interviews for this thesis.

Signed

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I would also like to thank all those who agreed to be interviewed about their experiences as war correspondents, news producers and managers involved in the coverage of war. In the course of researching this thesis, I interviewed 14 journalists in locations as varied as Queensland's Sunshine Coast, the medieval town of Prato in Italy, and the windy streets of Manhattan. Nearly all were vividly forthcoming with the facts but less so with their feelings, a reflection of (a) lifetimes spent writing about others rather than about themselves and (b) a professional code that emphasises, at least nominally, objectivity over subjectivity. Those interviewed are listed in the Appendices.

John Tulloh and Tony Hill at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in Sydney connected me with former correspondents and gave direction on the substantial ABC component in the thesis. I am grateful to the Corporation for allowing access to their files, and - taking a rather large leap back in time - for employing me as a cadet journalist at a very tender age. After all these years, it remains my primary life-shaping experience.

On a personal note, I would like to thank my wife Amanda and sons Nikos and Alexias for their support and understanding. Having worked in the media, indeed having met me in a television newsroom, Amanda understands the pressures of news and now knows the pressures involved in having a partner writing about it. In particular, Amanda made an invaluable contribution in transcribing the many hours of interviews I recorded around the globe.

I dedicate this thesis to her.

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THESIS ABSTRACT:

This thesis explores how war reporting on Australian television has been dramatically reshaped over the last 40 years, particularly by new technologies. Specifically, it seeks to answer these questions:

1. How did differing cultural, social, political and professional contexts, available technology and battlefield experience affect the attitudes, editorial content and narrative forms of two generations of television correspondents - in Vietnam and Iraq respectively?
2. How did technological and other industry changes over the 30 years between Vietnam and Iraq reshape the power relationship between the war correspondent in the field and his news producers and managers? What impact did these changes have on the resulting screened coverage? What are the longer-term implications for journalism and for audiences?

The aim of the thesis is not to question the relative *quality* of reporting but to examine the changing nature of warfare, and technology, and how these and other factors impacted on reporting *processes and outcomes*; and, from this, to draw some conclusions about how war might be covered in future.

The thesis is informed by my involvement in the broad spectrum of matters discussed here: as the ABC Television correspondent in the East Timor war of 1975 (in which five Australian-based television newsmen were killed); as a long-time foreign news specialist and reporter; as a former Executive Producer of the ABC's *The 7.30 Report*; and as an editorial manager with ABC News and Current Affairs. I have cited a range of professional and critical-academic sources in an attempt to provide deeper insights into the challenges of TV war reporting.

NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY:

‘War correspondent’ initially, and for many decades, referred specifically to a journalist experiencing war with soldiers in the battlefield and writing dispatches for newspapers. Media roles have subsequently expanded, merged and blurred to the point where ‘war correspondent’ is now used widely to describe reporters for radio, television and newspapers; special writers for magazines; photographers shooting ‘stills’; film and video camera ‘persons’; auxiliaries such as sound and editing crew working in war zones; and increasingly, one person alone performing several of the above roles. To reflect these contemporary realities, I have implied this broader definition throughout my thesis.

Since the vast majority of war reporters have been, and continue to be, men, I have used the male pronoun when describing the species in general. This in no way implies a diminished regard for the women who have reported war - indeed, correspondents such as the BBC’s Kate Adie and CNN’s Christiane Amanpour have been among the best.

The term ‘press’ originally referred to the print medium, but post World War Two, its use extended to all news media, including radio and television. More recently, the collective term ‘media’ has come into widespread use, while ‘press’ is also still used in this sense. In this thesis I have settled on ‘media’ to indicate the collective, and ‘press’ only when referring to newspapers. However, readers should be aware that ‘press’ may still appear in quotations from other sources to indicate all forms of media. In addition, I have treated the term ‘the media’ as a singular noun (as in, “The media *is* not to blame...”) in line with industry and popular usage, rather than the grammatically correct plural (“The media *are*...”). Again, readers should be aware that both forms may be found in direct quotations.

To avoid confusion between the abbreviated terms commonly used for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the American Broadcasting

Company (also ABC), I have abbreviated the Australian organisation (more frequently referred to in this thesis) to “the ABC” or “ABC News”; the United States network to “ABC (America)” and “ABC (America) News”. Hence, “ABC News’ Peter Munckton” and “ABC (America) News’ Peter Jennings”. Here, direct quotations are adjusted accordingly.

During the Vietnam War, South Vietnam’s communist guerrillas were referred to alternately as the ‘Viet Cong’ (two words) and the ‘Vietcong’ (one word), and here I have settled on the former usage. Again, direct quotations may use either term.

While the thesis title implies a focus on Australian coverage, the reality is that Australian television during both wars relied heavily on material generated by international agencies and U.S. and British television networks. The increasing globalisation of television news - and its rapid merging with other electronic forms such as the Internet - adds to the complexity of trying to separate the ‘Australian’ elements in the production chain from the broader international context; indeed, doing so might lead to a skewed perception that Australian networks operated independently or uniquely in their coverage of the Vietnam and Iraq wars. (This was rarely the case.) As well, the media is served increasingly by ‘transnational’ correspondents, including a large number of Australian television reporters and crew working for foreign networks and agencies, such as CNN and Reuters.

For these reasons, while I have highlighted Australian aspects of coverage of both major wars where relevant (for example, in Australian reporters’ relations with the Australian armed forces in Vietnam and Iraq), I have generally treated the issues that faced Australian correspondents, networks, governments and the military as being those facing all media personnel involved, and thus have cited extensively the views and experiences of many non-Australian participants.