Schlesinger, Joe. “War stories: The fog of journalism”. The Toronto Star, Nov. 07, 2003.

From outright censorship to embedding reporters, governments have a history of trying to control coverage of conflicts This is an edited excerpt of Joe Schlesinger's lecture, which will be broadcast tonight on Ideas, on CBC Radio at 9.05 p.m.

It's one thing to expose the mighty. Journalists may even revel in it. But not in wartime, not when your countrymen are fighting and dying. Criticism, however well-founded, can be equated with something akin to treason.

That goes not just for the reporters, but for their bosses, too. Many of today's American editors have had to make the same calculation in how far to go in risking the rage of potent rightist pressure groups and the disapproval of their audiences and society at large.

In the two world wars, journalists had no such problem. On both sides everyone but everyone stayed onside. There wasn't any choice.

In World War I, correspondents were simply kept away from the fighting. If they were allowed anywhere near the front it was under tight restrictions. There were a few scribblers, brave souls who defied the military. When caught, though, they were jailed and threatened with being put up against a wall and shot if they did it again.

All news of the war was censored, manipulated, distorted, falsified. The butchery of millions in the trenches was minimized. Atrocity stories were made up out of whole cloth. The German press ran stories about German soldiers having their eyes gouged out; the British and French about Germans bayoneting children and cutting off women's breasts.

And the journalists just went along with it.

To a somewhat less stringent degree, much censorship was also imposed during World War II. All war dispatches were censored. But so was all private mail.

In Canada, there was a Directorate of Censorship as well as a Wartime Information Board whose role was to boost morale. There was some fine reporting done in World War II, much of it by Canadians such as Ross Munro, Gregory Clark, the CBC's Matthew Halton and Peter Stursberg. But propaganda then was hardly a dirty word. Only the other side's propaganda.

Then came Vietnam, and everything changed. It changed because it was, at first, not an American war. Yes, there were American soldiers there, but merely as "advisers." While censorship might have worked in Vietnam itself, this could not prevent journalists from filing critical findings from outside the country.

Washington countered the critical reporting coming out of Saigon by launching a highly professional public relations campaign. All through the late '60s when the U.S. had as many as 500,000 soldiers there, the Americans encouraged journalists to go to Vietnam - even flew some of them over - for show-and-tell tours to get across its own version of the war.

It didn't work. The Americans held daily briefings in Saigon on the progress of the war. Briefers dispensed inflated enemy body counts and minimized American and South Vietnamese losses. Nothing new in that either, of course.

But by making the Vietnam War accessible to so many journalists, the Americans lost control. Too many of us had covered the actions the briefers were reporting on, and in too many cases what we heard at the briefings did not square with what we had seen.

There was a pattern that could not be ignored, evidence ranging from the low morale of U.S. troops, from drug addiction to the "fragging," that is, the killing of officers, the corruption of the South Vietnamese regime and its officers to the disillusionment of the civilian population.

They knew all that in Washington, too, of course, even if they didn't admit it. And they acted on it, negotiating an armistice with the communists and then abandoning South Vietnam to its fate even as they pretended to defend it.

The fallout of Vietnam is still with us. At first, the Pentagon reacted by simply barring the media from its operations.

During the U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983. the Pentagon provided transport for some 300 journalists. But instead of flying them to Grenada, they flew them to Barbados, 250 kilometres away from the fighting, where they spoon-fed them with accounts of the invasion. Reporters who tried to land by boat were turned away at gunpoint.

Six years later, during the invasion of Panama, journalists were held over at airports in Miami and Costa Rica until the action was all over and it was considered safe to let them see the aftermath.

It wasn't just the Americans. During the Falklands War, Britain's Royal Marines took only a handful of reporters along to the war zone. No TV cameras were allowed, and all reports had to be filed over marine radio after being censored.

News organizations protested, of course. But it didn't do them much good.

By the time the first Gulf War came along, though, the Pentagon realized it couldn't very well handle press relations in a large war waged by a coalition as it did tight little operations such as Panama and Grenada.

So U.S. officials came up with a system of pool coverage, taking along one or two reporters to represent the whole press corps and then making their material available to all. Now, pools are an everyday journalistic arrangement to avoid having a horde of journalists swamping an event.

But the way it was managed in Saudi Arabia in the press hotel in Dhahran, way behind the frontlines, was bit of a boondoggle. Most of the pool positions were given to large U.S. news organizations. Pool crews were accompanied by military escort officers who sat in on all interviews to make sure soldiers didn't say anything they didn't want said. It wasn't called censorship any more; "security review" was the new term. And it was often petty and cosmetic.

For example, one reporter complained that when he described the mood of pilots returning from a successful mission as "giddy," the censors changed it to "proud."

The rest of the press corps - and that went for Canadian reporters in spades - was stuck watching this pool material coming in and gluing together some semblance of a story. In a way, you couldn't leave Dhahran because you might miss something significant coming out of the maw of the pool machine.

Besides, getting to the front on your own was "mission impossible." There was only one highway from Dhahran north to Kuwait and the front. And off the road, nothing but desert. You needed not just a great deal of luck but also influence to stand a chance. It was one of the most frustrating assignments I'd ever had.

When the allied ground offensive started, though, the system broke down. It worked as long as the front line was static as coalition forces used their air superiority and artillery to soften up the Iraqis.

Once the allied armies were on the move, it was relatively easy to slip by roadblocks by melding our vehicle unnoticed into the middle of a military convoy. We managed to wend our way into Kuwait between the U.S. and Saudi forces to do what we were meant to do: report first-hand on what was going on.

Fast forward to the next Gulf War, and you have a new wrinkle on trying to control the media in war. And that is the "embedding" of journalists. It means assigning journalists to individual units to accompany them more or less for the duration.

While embedding gives reporters and camera people closer access to combat unit operations, it has several disadvantages. The first is that if a news organization had, let's say, two reporters in Iraq, it could not afford to leave one of them isolated with just one unit; it would need the flexibility to have them both cover various aspects of the war, in Baghdad, Basra, at coalition headquarters or wherever.

Besides, what you got would depend on the unit you were assigned to. If you were Canadian, that wasn't much.

Not signing on, on the other hand as an "embed," as they call them, left journalists in a difficult position. Dubbed by the Pentagon as "unilaterals," they were denied access to U.S. forces, harried at roadblocks and in general treated by the Americans as pariahs.

What bothers me about the "embed" phenomenon is not the embedding; it was what happened to those who were not embedded, the downright nastiness of the Pentagon's handling of the media that were not, so to speak, "on the team," the extension of the Bush administration's predilection of seeing the world in terms of "if you're not with us, you're against us."

I wasn't there. But it must have been frustrating, and I must give all credit to the unilaterals - including my colleagues at the CBC TV News - for the great work they did under difficult and dangerous conditions.

For journalists, it was certainly a dangerous war. A dozen media workers were killed, five of them by friendly fire. Some were embeds, some unilaterals and others lost their lives while working in Baghdad when it was still in Saddam Hussein's hands. It was proportionately a much higher casualty rate than that of the U.S. and British military.

U.S. and British soldiers, along with Iraqi and other civilians, continue to be killed in Iraq, of course, even though the war is nominally over. But in a way what's happening in Iraq is closer to other conflicts we've had recently, wars that do not involve combat between regular armies, civil and guerrilla wars in which there is often no front line, no central command, little discipline and a lot of hate.

It hasn't happened in Iraq yet. This is the kind of war the world is seeing more of, small wars driven by an "us against the world" mentality. Such is the hate that no one is safe, least of all civilians, whether they are innocent bystanders or journalists.

It is not a good time to be a war correspondent.

Dalton Camp was a legendary Star columnist and political commentator who died in 2002.

The Dalton Camp Lecture

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**War by social media: Islamic State’s propaganda is growing online**

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It is a testament to the propaganda prowess of the world’s most infamous new terrorist organization that, in April of this year, the U.S. State Department created a Twitter account specifically to dissuade young men from running off to fight for the Islamic State (IS).

The account, called “Think Again Turn Away,” is nominally aimed at condemning all terrorist groups, but has focused its efforts almost exclusively at IS (previously known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL). However, with just 5,000 or so followers, the State Department’s account has only a tiny fraction of the following of IS-related accounts on Twitter. Indeed, almost every item the U.S. government account posts is usually inundated with antagonistic replies from IS supporters.

In terms of military might, resources or training, there is no comparison between the United States, in possession of the world’s most powerful military, and the ragtag group of local and foreign fighters currently wreaking havoc across much of Iraq and Syria. But in the propaganda war, at least, IS appears to be winning.

The most infamous piece of IS propaganda is the video released last week showing the beheading of U.S. journalist James Foley. But the group also disseminates countless other clips via social media, including ones which glorify day-to-day life in IS-controlled land.

In the past year, thousands of young men from Europe, Australia and North America have travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight for IS. The influx reflects not only the group’s growing popularity but also the stunning effectiveness of its propaganda arm, which today runs multiple video production studios, social-media accounts and even merchandising stores, where clothing stamped with the IS black flag logo is readily available for sale.

“Joining IS is now the cool thing to do in *jihadi* circles,” said Thomas Juneau, an assistant professor at the University of Ottawa’s Graduate School of Public and International Affairs.

“The number of Westerners that have been joining IS is unprecedented,” he said. “It’s probably in the thousands, and the return of foreign fighters … in the coming years will be one of the most important security concerns for the West.”

As the United States prepares in the coming weeks for what could become a much more sprawling effort to combat IS, the foreign fighters represent a unique challenge. Not only does their very presence in IS serve as a potential lure for other Western would-be *jihadis* to follow suit, they may also one day attempt to return to the West, taking the fight home to the places they were born.

**Identifying a killer**

James Foley, an American journalist with experience reporting from hot spots such as Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan, was abducted in Syria in 2012 and held hostage since then.

When an IS propaganda arm released a video last week showing Mr. Foley’s beheading, much of the world reacted with revulsion over his horrific death.

In the video, Mr. Foley is seen on his knees, wearing an orange jumpsuit. Standing beside him is an IS fighter holding a knife. The figure is clad entirely in black cloth, all but his eyes covered. After Mr. Foley is made to say a few last words, blaming the U.S. government for his looming execution, the IS fighter addresses U.S. President Barack Obama.

“Any attempt by you, Obama, to deny the Muslims their right of living in safety under the Islamic Caliphate will result in the bloodshed of your people,” he says, referring to the Islamist state the group is attempting to establish. The camera then cuts away as Mr. Foley is beheaded. His executioner then reappears beside another U.S. hostage, journalist Steven Sotloff, and says his fate is dependent on Mr. Obama’s next decision.

The hooded figure’s apparent British accent has sent authorities in that country scrambling to use sophisticated voice-recognition technology to identify the man. And by analyzing the man’s eyes, investigators have formed a composite sketch of what the rest of his face might look like. At the same time, British authorities have begun scouring some of the neighbourhoods in and around London where, in recent years, hundreds of young Muslim men have left to fight for IS in Iraq and Syria.

“There is a lot at stake,” said Mark Rowley, national policing lead for counterterrorism at London’s Metropolitan Police, in a plea for community support issued this week. “In addition to the public assistance in identifying potential terrorists, we all need community and religious leaders to continue to speak out against warped narratives and we need everyone to ensure that public debate does not give oxygen to the terrorists by giving them the publicity they seek.”

Mr. Rowley noted that British authorities arrested 69 people for Syria-related activities in the first half of this year, a fivefold increase from last year. Nearly half of British travellers to Syria who have been deemed “of concern,” Mr. Rowley added, were not previously known to authorities as terrorist risks.

The struggle to identify Mr. Foley’s killer is in many ways illustrative of the myriad challenges facing Western governments trying to slow the recent meteoric growth of IS. Even if Mr. Foley’s killer is identified, capturing him from IS-controlled territory may still prove exceedingly difficult. The challenge is as much about combatting the terrorist group’s narrative as it is about bringing any one IS member to justice.

For the IS propaganda arms, the Foley video represents one extreme of a binary media strategy. On one hand, the group has become infamous in recent months for posting graphic videos showing beheadings and multiple executions as a kind of warning to the organization’s many enemies.

However, the IS media teams have also produced many videos that present the so-called Caliphate of Iraq and Syria as a safe haven for pious Muslims. In one such video, released earlier this month, a handful of foreign fighters call on Muslims from around the world to come join IS. Interspersed with footage of children playing, the video features testimonials from fighters originally from South Africa, Belgium, Britain and the United States, among other countries.

A slick, 10-minute IS video apparently recorded in Syria in 2013 includes a Canadian who is believed to have died fighting with the extremists. André Poulin of Timmins, Ont., says he was just like any other “regular Canadian” before he embraced Islam. “I watched hockey. I went to the cottage in the summertime. I loved to fish,” he says in the video. “I was a regular person. *Mujahedeen* [holy warriors] are regular people too … We have lives outside of our job.”

The quantity and production quality of the IS media offensive has, in many ways, caught Western authorities off-guard. Mr. Rowley said that British investigators are currently in the process of removing some 1,100 pieces of content from the Web that breach the country’s terrorism laws – of these, about 800 are related to the conflict in Syria and Iraq.

**Building a coalition**

As British and U.S. investigators attempt to identify Mr. Foley’s killer, Washington appears on the verge of enlisting a broader coalition to contain the massive gains made by IS in the past few months. With many U.S. voters still not very supportive of another large U.S. combat troop presence in Iraq, the White House is pressing its allies to engage on a number of other fronts.

“It will require an effective, inclusive Iraqi government that can unite that country to face the threat that’s posed by [IS],” said White House press secretary Josh Earnest this week. “It will require the involvement of other governments in the region that have a blatantly obvious interest in this outcome. It will require the involvement of countries around the world, particularly our Western allies that also have an incentive to confront that threat that’s posed by [IS].”

For Washington, that strategy necessitates asking different things from different allies. For example, the White House is likely to request that Turkey beef up security along its border with Syria, which is a potential gateway for money, arms and fighters coming in from Europe. The U.S. government will also press Saudi Arabia to pressure Sunni groups in Iraq to buy in to a unity government, rather than side with Sunni militants in IS.

“The most important thing for IS to be contained … is for moderate Sunnis to hive themselves off from a very fragile coalition with IS and join a unity government in Baghdad,” said Prof. Juneau of the University of Ottawa.

But unlike the United States, many of these regional allies are next-door neighbours to IS and must weigh the likelihood that their actions may provoke an immediate response from the terrorist group. As such, it is yet unclear just how much they will be willing to contribute to U.S. efforts to contain, if not crush the so-called Caliphate.

“What you now have is the beginning of a full-fledged strategic approach on the part of the Obama administration,” said Linda Robinson, a senior international policy analyst at the RAND Corporation.

“Many of us will regard this as a test case of how much you can do by supporting like-minded groups in the region.”