DWELLING ON THE PAST, A proposal for textual analysis of Vietnam Era reportage.

The idea of the press as a check on government abuse, as a veritable fourth branch of government, is well ingrained in popular thinking and also finds expression in scholarly work. Other scholarship challenges this assumption, finding that American journalism traverses a much narrower field of inquiry than generally supposed. Nowhere has this debate had more poignancy than in the discussion of Vietnam reportage.

Post war assessments of the press' role in Vietnam falls into two divergent camps. In one, the press is viewed collectively as a government adversary intent upon bringing down U.S. policy initiatives, best described as the "oppositional press" position. In its most extreme expression, this view blames the media for the military defeat in Vietnam.

The alternate view holds that the dominant frame for American press reportage was a Cold War analysis that embraced U.S. war goals – defeat of the Communists - but questioned the means. Some critiques have found that even journalists known for exposés that profoundly impacted popular views of the war – Morey Safer reporting on Cam Ne, David Halberstam on the Buddhist crisis, Malcolm Brown and

Peter Arnett to name a few – were all supportive of U.S. policy overall, at least initially.

One well-known example of post-war journalism that brought this divergence in analysis into focus was the CBS documentary, "The Uncounted Enemy, A Vietnam Deception". General Westmoreland, accused in the documentary of systematically underreporting the numbers of enemy forces, responded with a $120 million libel suit against CBS. A fierce debate ensued. But as noted in the Columbia Journalism Review of September/October 1982, "neither of the two major critiques… probed possible deficiencies in the substance of the program."

CJR opined that CBS didn't consult any of the scholars or journalists who could have provided a broader perspective on the significance of the number manipulation. CJR proposed that more important than CBS' retroactive conclusion that they should have aired an opinion more supportive of Westmoreland's stance, might have been a "re-evaluation of the journalistic framework for approaching historical controversy".

Another example was Tonkin. Fred Friendly wrote an eloquent mea culpa for interpretive opportunities missed in the Winter of 1970, also published in Columbia Journalism Review.

> The tragedy was that what emerged on the home screen was at best a series of sharply edited, professionally honed episodes… Yet the failure to assemble all these elements into the kind of interpretive journalism that would have enabled the American people to understand the magnitude of the decision their leadership was about to make was a serious lapse. (CJR, 1970)

Friendly confessed that CBS' coverage, a five minute wrap-up of the Tonkin Gulf incident that lacked comprehensive analysis, would always haunt him. Only Edward G. Murrow, then gravely ill, had the presence of mind to call and complain about the broadcast. As Friendly put it, journalists had gone to Vietnam as "members of the team", undermining their watchdog role (Friendly, 1970).

Research interest and Proposal

Most of my research interests revolve around the press' role in defining controversy and engendering community debate and participation, i.e. supporting democratic processes. To this end, I am most interested in what the press doesn't say, in what it fails to convey about a conflict, be it the historical background or the substance of controversy, which are often omitted or glossed over in favor of coverage of more topical interests.

My thinking on how this question played out in Vietnam is influenced by Daniel Hallin's adroit analysis of the voluminous archive of Vietnam reportage in his book, *The*

Uncensored War, The Media and Vietnam (1986). Hallin divides discourse into three spheres; the Sphere of Legitimate Controversy, the realm of issues recognized by "major established actors" of the political process and therefore the domain of objectivity in reportage; the Sphere of Consensus, where agreement is so assumed that journalists feel no responsibility to air dissenting views and will, conversely, act as "advocates or celebrants of consensus values"; and the Sphere of Deviance, the realm of those "unworthy of being heard" (1986, p. 117). Hallin contends that most Vietnam era journalists were so influenced by Cold War ideology that their reportage never challenged the basic presumption of the war, only its methods. And few journalists ventured beyond the Sphere of Legitimate Controversy.

One who ventured beyond and was vilified for the act was Harrison Salisbury. In late 1966, Salisbury, then National Editor and Assistant Managing Editor of the New York Times, traveled behind enemy lines to report from Hanoi. While his work has been validated retrospectively, Salisbury's Hanoi based reports inspired a vitriolic response from his contemporaries.

My proposal is to look at a selection of critical articles generated by Salisbury's contemporaries that took issue with his reportage. What were their criticisms and why were they leveled? What was the ideological basis, or journalistic framework, that defined the boundaries of acceptable reportage? What took Salisbury's work outside the realm of acceptable controversy?

Others have started this discussion. Mark Lawrence describes the historical details of the controversy in *Mission Intolerable: Harrison Salisbury's Trip to Hanoi and the Limits of Dissent against the Vietnam War* (2006), which will be discussed in more detail below. Harrison, Lawrence and Cozma have analyzed the content of Salisbury's work in detail in *The Paradox of Respectability: The Limits of Indexing an Harrison Salisbury's Coverage of the Vietnam War* (2010), comparing Salisbury's Hanoi based reports to his 1954 correspondence from Moscow that garnered the Pulitzer Prize. Neither article takes a detailed look at the content of the articles generated by Salisbury's contemporary critics as I propose here. And while Lawrence provides a historical frame for the controversy, he doesn't explicitly consider its ideological ramifications.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Cultural Theory and Pragmatism

My previous paper for the media theory class looked at the work of Jurgen Habermas, John Dewey, James Carey and other theorists whose work shares a preoccupation with the “public” and democracy.

At the core of both the Pragmatist and Critical Cultural Theory schools, or what Bohman has simply referred to as Democratic Theory (2005), is a preoccupation with community, vibrant discourse and democracy (noting the common linguistic root of commune, community and communication). Both schools are grounded historically and both consider the ideological basis of communication.

Critical theory is distinguished by its multi-disciplinary approach, mindful of the confluence of communication theory, ethics, socio-political philosophy and history since the 1929 founding of the Institute for Social Research (Bohman, 2005). On the other side of the Atlantic, John Dewey’s *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) laid out the Pragmatist argument for communication as democracy’s pre-requisite, an argument echoed later (without attribution to Dewey) in Habermas’ *The Public Sphere and Structural Transformation* (1974). Carey, whose analysis bridges history, ritual and art, called the public “the God term of journalism” (1987, p.5). Carey distinguished journalism from news and reportage, which have historically documented daily life whether through fable, parable or song, with the idea that journalism is the product of a new means of production and publicly defined democracy.

It took Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action to bring "that radical democratic mentality which is present in the best American traditions and articulated in American Pragmatism," (cited in Shalin, 1992, p.2) into the Critical Cultural fold, allowing some reconciliation of the two theoretical schools. Bohman credits Habermas with "a systematic reconstruction of democratic theory in communicative terms"(2005). Similarly, Michael Shudson (1991), noting the relative dearth of historical writing that considers the centrality of communication issues, considers Habermas and Benedict Anderson the contemporary thinkers who can set an agenda for research in communication history.

As for ideology, Louis Althusser's definition distills the complex into a few words – "Ideology is the 'lived' relationship between men and their world, or a reflected form of this unconscious relation, for instance a 'philosophy'" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2009).

Bohman describes Habermas and Durkheim's view of society as "symbolically structured, moral reality such that each of its members internalizes this structure as part of their acquisition of identity", forming Durkheim's "collective conscience" (2005). This allows both a psychoanalytic and political dimension to the discussion of ideology.

A reasonable discussion of Vietnam era journalism necessitates both historical and ideological inquiry. U.S. official and press analysis during the Vietnam War was quick to recognize the ideological motivation of the enemy and to use it as an argument for intervention. Introspection was less forthcoming, leaving American ideological motivation mostly at the unconscious level. This becomes particularly interesting when considering how the dominant press ideology limited coverage of the war, especially during the crucial early years of escalation.

Method

Discourse or textual analysis is the logical fit for historical treatment of Vietnam era communication. The historian looks first to primary sources – interviews with surviving participants or relevant artifacts, in this case, Vietnam era press reports. It could be argued that close analysis of an artifact may lend a truer reading of a moment in time than an interview – an artifact is a sort of time capsule, fixed and unchangeable, while an interview subject is able to revise and edit memory and the transmission of memory.

According to Larsen, Kracauer (also a critical theorist of the Frankfurt School) argued for looking at texts as a meaningful whole. Texts are “historically determined to the extent that they express the general ideological trends (Zeitgeist) of a given period” (Larsen, 1991, p. 123). Larsen continues; “deciphering of latent meanings through qualitative content analysis implies a deconstruction of ideology and a critique of its social origins…” (1991, p. 123).

Larsen is also interested in the relationship of textual structure to social context. He cites how, for Levi Strauss, genre becomes a “’mythical’ structure serving to interpret social conflicts to the audience in ritual or symbolic terms” and “therefore function ideologically in the sense that they reproduce and reinforce beliefs of how social reality is (and should be) structured.” (Larsen, 1991, p.129).

While Larsen’s comments on textual analysis mostly address the whole, Van Dijk (1991) details its parts. Van Dijk talks about the semantic iceberg and what is hidden beneath the surface, the ideological implications of phrasing, and thematic structure and the meaning conveyed by that structure. Van Dijk returns in various ways to discussion of the unsaid, either through that which is not said explicitly but implied and that which is totally omitted. In the course of textual analysis of a sample article, he refers to the "strategic use of irrelevance", in this case demonstrators labeled Marxist, revolutionary, black, lesbian or gay when that information is irrelevant to their political act but highly relevant to their portrayal as "other". In the same sample article, little attention is paid to the social and political background of the event reported while significant column space is devoted to derogatory description of the demonstrators. Under style, Van Dijk considers word choice, for example "mob" and "rent-a-mob" in place of "crowd" and "demonstrators".

Finally, Van Dijk raises Herman and Chomsky's concept of manufactured consent of the reader and the search for a "pattern of discursive features" (Van Dijk, 1991, p. 116) set in a frame of "cognitive, social, political and cultural" context (Van Dijk, 1991).

Applications of Textual or Discourse Analysis

I found Ruth Wodak's work to be particularly instructive. In *History in the Making/The Making of History, The "German Wehrmacht" in collective and individual memories in Austria* (2006), Wodak employs a "discourse-historical" approach to a multi disciplinary, cross-generational study of Austrian construction of the traumatic past with a focus on the issues of guilt and personal responsibility.

Wodak describes four levels of inquiry triangulation; 1)linguistic 2) speech act theory and argumentation theory 3) psychology of trauma and 4) the socio-political and historical context of the discourse in question. Each of these levels is further subdivided. For example, the linguistic analysis was broken down into four sub-categories; topics covered, linguistic expression, analysis of argumentation strategies used, and analysis of participants. Wodak found that the three generations studied all employed strategies to deny their personal or family's participation in war crimes – "justification and legitimization strategies are present in all the texts" (2006, p. 149) - and that the strategies varied by generation.

History serves two purposes for Wodak – context of the discursive event, in this case, war crimes committed by the Wehrmacht, and analysis of the subtle "diachronic change" in discourse. Put another way, Wodak considers how "arguments, topics, narratives, events, appraisals, topai, etc. change when transmitted from generation to generation… Arguments are decontextualized and recontextualized, and thus gain new meaning" (2006, p. 132). Wodak sees this construction (or reconstruction) of reality and collective memory as an integral aspect of cultural self-definition.

Gary C. Tallman and Joseph P. McKerns' article, *Press Mess, David Halberstam, the Buddhist Crisis and U.S. Policy in Vietnam, 1963* was the original inspiration for my subject. Tallman and McKerns' textual analysis claims to be the first to examine the central themes of Halberstam's coverage of the Buddhist crisis and evolution of the professional conventions of early 1960s' journalism. The authors contend that Halberstam's reports contributed to a shift in reporting conventions from what they term "dead pan" objectivity to a more adversarial and interpretive form. The authors document the rift that occurred between American journalists and U.S. and Vietnamese officials over the conduct of the war, a rift that increasingly forced the journalists into a more adversarial stance, even as they concurred with the essential aims of military intervention in Vietnam.

Tallman and McKerns discuss the evolution of news management by U.S. administrations beginning with Eisenhower and its undoing in Vietnam. Then they get more specific about the social and political context of the Buddhist crisis and how Halberstam's coverage of the crisis confronted U.S. conduct of the war. They analyze the major themes in Halberstam’s series, including his omission of the Vietnamese point of view. And they conclude that his reports had an impact on both U.S. public opinion and official conduct of the war. Curiously, the authors fail to mention U.S. involvement in the coup that toppled Diem shortly thereafter. The most interesting contribution, from my point of view, is their conclusion that Halberstam maintained a Cold War ideology throughout this period and that, while he disagreed with conduct of the war, he concurred with its basic aim.

While Tallman and McKern’s analysis is less nuanced than Wokak’s and lacks her intricate multi-disciplinary approach, it establishes a reasonable model for placing textual analysis in historical context.

Rick Berg, in his 1986 essay, *Losing the War, Covering Vietnam in an age of Technology*, contributes a discourse analysis of Vietnam coverage in television and film. This is a dense and ambitious piece of work that covers TV and films spanning forty years. Berg is interested in the “failure of our modes of cultural representation” in the context of “our desperate desire to win the lost war” (1986, p. 95).

It can be argued that film is an essential part of our “decontextualization” and “recontextualization” of Vietnam, with the recontextualized version becoming part of our collective “historical” memory. In the end, our collective memory is frighteningly ahistorical, as evidenced by Berg’s dissection of Vietnam filmography.

First he considers the televised war;

> With every repetition of these real TV images from Vietnam, we witness a continued insistence on sublimating an unstable historical understanding by means of a violated ideology… The recurring TV images stabilize our understanding and fix the past with known images. (Berg, 1986, p. 106).

Once television stopped depicting the “real” war, Hollywood took over. Instead of providing historical context, from his vantage point a decade post defeat, Berg sees Vietnam films rehashing the paradigm of a “patrol with a definite mission” (1986, p. 108).

The “enemy” in nearly every film covered by Berg is either omitted or grossly misrepresented. Films of the seventies and eighties saw Vietnam through the lens of the veteran, first depicting the vet as a threat to law and order (the embodiment of war evil) and later as a self-righteous vigilante (Rambo) intent on redefining and winning the war. Berg even sees revisionism in movies like Hearts and Minds which relegated depiction of vets and their voices to *after* the credits, “where few if any will hear what they say” (1986, p. 104).

In contrast, Berg offers a few films with a sense of historical continuum, but these were fringe films not seen by most Americans and nearly lost to our collective consciousness.

Bernie Cook, in *Over my Dead Body: the Ideological Use of Dead Bodies in Network News Coverage of Vietnam* (2001), gets particular in his discourse analysis, looking closely at the depiction of enemy dead by the networks. He refers to work by Elaine Scarry who argued that war requires a reorientation and “rejection of civilized impulses” toward the enemy’s body (cited in Cook, 2001, p. 204).

“One’s opponent must be demonized, constructed as a negative other, unlike the self, or reified, turned into an object, which can be destroyed.” (cited in Cook, 2001, p. 205). Further, Cook argues that network news supported this process through their depiction of dead Vietnamese.

Cook describes the narrative structure of Vietnam reportage, i.e. Good vs. Evil and the corresponding depiction of war dead. Rather than seeing an oppositional press, Cook concludes that network news continued a practice begun in WWII of using enemy dead to support the ideological stance of the U.S. war effort. For example, American soldiers were presented in action mode while

Vietnamese were shown dead, wounded or captured, passive and mute (Cook, 2001).

I found this piece instructive in its attention to detail, particularly in regards to non-verbal depiction of the "other".

Literature Review

Two peer-reviewed articles tackle the particularities of the Harrison Salisbury reportage from Hanoi. Both owe a debt to Daniel Hallin whose exhaustive review of Vietnam War reportage defines the discussion.

Mission Intolerable: Harrison Salisbury's Trip to Hanoi and the Limits of Dissent against the Vietnam War, Mark Lawrence (2006)

Lawrence ably sets the historical stage for scrutiny of the Salisbury controversy. He discusses three levels of constraint on the news; government news management, peer pressure and conflict within the New York Times, Salisbury's paper. He outlines five thematic challenges to the administration's "line" on Vietnam inherent in Salisbury's reporting. And he sketches the reaction at the three levels mentioned above (administration, peer and NYTimes) and discusses Salisbury's rejection by the Pulitzer Prize review panel.

He concludes with the assessment that history validated Salisbury's work and considers the motivation for the furor that ensued. Lawrence offers Hallin's thesis as a potential explanation, buttressed by Bartholomew Sparrow's assertion that governments apply leverage to keep journalists in line. He mentions "risk aversion" in news organizations and I.F. Stone's comment that simple jealousy on the part of other journalists could have been a factor. But Lawrence sidesteps the opportunity to consider the ideological basis of the controversy, ultimately finding the motives for the media attack "difficult to establish precisely" (2006, p. 457). Despite that limitation, Lawrence concludes that the New York Times' temerity vis-a-vis support of their correspondent underscores the impediments to development of a critical journalistic perspective on the war.

The Paradox of Respectability: The Limits of Indexing an Harrison Salisbury's Coverage of the Vietnam War, John Maxwell Hamilton, Regina G. Lawrence and Raluca Cozma, 2010.

Hamilton et al apply Bennett's indexing theory to the Salisbury affair. They mention the three levels of constraint discussed by Lawrence. They reference studies by Hallin, Althaus, Bennett and others regarding the "Washington culture of consensus" and "tactical management of news sources". Their reference to Althaus' assertion that "the public statements of government officials can regulate the discursive parameters of [news] coverage" (cited in Hamilton, 2010, p. 79) hews closely to Hallin's thesis. Their intent is to use the Salisbury controversy to consider “the processes by which indexing is enforced and overcome” (Hamilton et al, 2010, p. 80).

Their work can be broken into three parts;

1) Salisbury’s challenge to the administration’s Vietnam “script” and an outline of the ensuing reaction,

2) content analysis and comparison of Salisbury’s Vietnam reportage and his 1954 correspondence from Moscow which won a Pulitzer,

3) an investigation of how Salisbury managed to report outside the usual constraints.

Their systematic comparison of the two series of reports supports their thesis that Salisbury was held to a higher standard of news sourcing when his reports contradicted the official line.

The “Uncensored War”. The Media and Vietnam, Daniel C. Hallin (1986).

Hallin’s work sets the gold standard for analysis of Vietnam War coverage with a densely detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis that fairly decimates the oppositional press position.

Hallin describes the ethos of professional and “objective” journalism that grew out of the Progressive era and what he calls a “historical trade-off” as “journalists gave up the right to speak with a political voice of their own" in exchange for access to the inner sanctum of the policy makers, "accepting for the most part the language, agenda and perspectives of the political 'establishment'". (1986, p.8) Journalists went to Vietnam as part of the team, committed to a "national security" consensus that defined the parameters of discourse. To cite just one fact mentioned - only 8% of the press reports considered in his exhaustive review of print and television coverage contained explicit criticism of major actors in the war. Rather, most negative reporting, including the heavy criticism that developed post Tet, reflected power struggles within the establishment.

Hallin opens with a consideration of news management from 1961 to 1965, finding that the president's ability to manage the news rested on two main factors; a shared Cold War ideology and the practice of objective journalism within the constraints of that consensus opinion.

Chapter 2 opens with an illustrative quote from David Halberstam dated 1965;

> I believe that Vietnam is a legitimate part of that global commitment. A strategic country in a key area, it is perhaps one of only five or six nations in the world that is truly vital to U.S. interests. (cited in Hallin, 1986, p. 26))

Hallin describes the period after WWII as “an age of ideological consensus” that allowed for a reductionism that “related every crisis to a single, familiar axis of conflict”, the fight against Communist tyranny (1986, p. 50). Hallin intersperses his argument with examples of Cold War framing. Meanwhile, the voices of Vietnamese Communists, peasants and the issue of land tenure were absent from the news.

Chapter 3 looks at coverage of the massive military escalation of 1964 and 1965 in the context of Cold War ideology and the concomitant ethos of objectivity in journalism. Using the Tonkin Gulf incident as an example, Hallin shows how objectivity can miss the mark. Here he elaborates on the 1) media’s reliance on official sources, 2) focus on the president, 3) failure to interpret or analyze and 4) focus on immediate events to the exclusion of historical context (Hallin, 1986, pp. 71-75). He carries the argument forward through ensuing events documenting the failure of the press at this crucial historical juncture.

The second part of the book documents the televised war. It is here that Hallin elaborates his spheres of discourse, placing the debate over Vietnam firmly within the Sphere of Legitimate Controversy. He calls the negative reporting that surfaced, reports like Morey Safer’s from Cam Ne or

Halberstam’s on the Buddhist Crisis, “minor currents in a general flow of reporting that was strongly supportive of American actions in Vietnam.” (Hallin, 1986, p. 133) Interestingly, Hallin’s description of the dominant “search and destroy mission story” (1986, p. 139) in the 1965-1967 period echoes Berg’s observation of the paradigm of “a patrol with a definite mission”.

As for depiction of the enemy, “television coverage of the North Vietnamese and NLF focused on terror to the almost total exclusion of politics.” (Hallin, 1986, p. 156) Here Hallin uses textual analysis, combined with quantitative content analysis to buttress his argument. He concludes that the theme of terrorism relegated the enemy to the Sphere of Deviance, dehumanizing him while publicly defining the contest as a noble fight between Good and Evil.

Finally, Hallin counters the then prevailing assumption that the increase of negative war reportage post Tet represented the media’s adversarial or watchdog role. He maintains that the press remained docile and that what changed was that Vietnam left the Sphere of Consensus and entered the Sphere of Legitimate Controversy as the power elite began to argue its merits.

Hallin’s exceptional critique of Vietnam reportage merits frequent visitation by journalists, policy makers and media theorists. For my purposes, it forms an indispensible theoretical and historical foundation for textual analysis of Vietnam era reportage. More particularly, his discourse sphere model provides a very workable framework for discussion of the reaction to Salisbury’s reports.

Salisbury’s Dastardly War Crime, I.F. Stone, 1967.
Though not strictly a scholarly work, I would like to also mention I.F. Stone’s reaction to the furor surrounding Salisbury’s reporting. Stone wrote an opinionated and fiery response to the uproar in January 1967 that presages many of the points Hallin raised two decades later. *Salisbury’s Dastardly War Crime* opens with the administration’s essential problem – how to manage the news when their lies about civilian bombing casualties have been exposed by the New York Times.

Then Stone lambasts the reaction of the Washington Press Corps, which he calls a “barrage of slander”. In a sidebar on the front page of the Weekly, Stone headlines a section with, “*This might be called Ponji Stick Journalism - Gee Whiz, How Wicked can Ho Get?*” Stone quotes Chalmers M. Roberts piece from the Washington Post (edited for length);

> Now he [Ho Chi Minh] is using another weapon, one as cleverly conceived as the poison-tipped bamboo spikes his men emplant underfoot for the unwary enemy. At long last, he has opened his country, or part of it, to an American journalist… to force a halt in the American bombing of his country… Harrison Salisbury of the New York Times is Ho's chosen instrument. (cited in Stone, 1967, page 1)

On page 2, another side-bar titled "The Smog that Walter Lippman Flees" considers the relationship of journalists to their official sources, from Lippman's repudiation of his friendship with President Johnson on down, written on the occasion of Lippman's decision to leave Washington over his disagreement on the war.

Stone's irreverent counter-attack gets to the heart of the controversy without mincing words and provides us years later with a starting point for further inquiry.

Dwelling on the Past

Wodak credits historical consciousness, whether manufactured or real, for its impact on collective consciousness of the present. She quotes Geertz' concept of culture;

> …a historically handed down system of meanings, with the assistance of which human beings pass on, maintain and further develop their knowledge of life and their attitude to life. (cited in Wodak, 2006, p.130)

With hindsight, reportage from the Vietnam era appears shockingly one-sided, even jingoistic. Few objected in the 1960s and 70s when the enemy were called “lethal little men” (Time, 1965) or when “Vietnamization” was put forward as a remedy for defeat with little argument from the press. The importance of the press’ failure to engender debate in the debacle that was Vietnam cannot be overstated.

It is ironic in this context to consider John Dewey’s early twentieth century criticism of journalism and dire prognosis for the public, a prognosis with enduring relevance. While textual analysis of forty year old reportage may seem of only scholarly interest, in my view, when extrapolated, detailed analysis of press failures may hold import for today’s reportage and our continuing failure to historicize current conflict and to adequately consider the social, ideological and political interplay of the forces in question.

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