Topic: Reporting the Vietnam War.

How did the US media reporting of the Vietnam out of context influence the American public?

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The page of contents suggests a rather basic structure to the essay.
How did the US media reporting of the Vietnam War out of context influence the American public?

The Vietnam War is an extremely interesting war. The war, which began in 1955 and ended approximately 20 years later in 1975, was actually a civil war. Intervention and aid was provided by the United States to South Vietnamese forces to help fight against the communist north Vietnamese forces. The media in the Vietnam War can be divided into different sub categories. There are the reporters in the field who would work tirelessly to get the latest information back to the US. The news agencies in the US would then interpret the information themselves and create the news that would be given to the US public, using the mediums of television, radio and newspaper. In previous wars, the US media had always been censored. For example, propaganda was used in the Second World War to help ensure public support. When the Vietnam War started, US media censorship was not imposed, putting the US media that was reporting in a foreign country under a great deal of responsibility that it had not previously possessed. This raises the question of how the US media took war events out of context, and how significant of an impact this had on the American people's perception of the war.

The US media portrayed the Vietnam War as primarily an American war because it did not fully understand the context in which the Vietnam War was taking place due to two primary reasons. First, the South Vietnamese government did not have a public relations apparatus and were not

Quite a number of different points made here, not very focused so far.
really interested in opening themselves up to foreign media (Braestrup 27). Second, the members of the US media reporting from the field in Vietnam found themselves in a foreign country where the local population spoke a different language, making it difficult to accurately convey the South Vietnamese side of the war (Braestrup 28). As a result, the US reporters received information about the South Vietnamese primarily from US advisors (Ramsey 56). However, the reality was that the South Vietnamese were fighting just as hard as their American allies. For example, the US Department of Defense released casualty statistics for 1967 showing that the United States had lost 9,738 troops that year, the South Vietnamese forces had lost 12,176 (Braestrup 26). This shows us how the US media by not understanding the context in which the war was taking place, gave the American and other readers of the US media the impression that the Vietnam War was an American war. The impact that this had is very significant because it would affect their perception of the war. The American public would be less likely to see it as a war for South Vietnamese freedom. The focus of the American media also affected the war in other ways.

My investigation will focus on methods used by journalists and organisations when reporting the Vietnam War. Some of the key resources that I am planning to use are books that journalists who reported on the Vietnam War published after the war was over.

The Introduction appears to end here. The RQ is stated as a heading but it is not very clear how the impact on the American public will be measured. Rather assertive regarding the limitations of the US media in Vietnam. Methodology is not very clearly stated.

prior wars, censorship played an important role in the reporting by the US media because led to such reporting focusing on US victories rather than defeats, the Vietnam War became of the first uncensored covered by the media in a long time, even the Korean war had its censorship (Mark). Having an uncensored press available to report on the Vietnam War allowed the US media to bring much more of its bias and prejudices into the topics on which they focused.
reporting. The US media's tendency to report on US military defeats in the Vietnam War rather than on their victories illustrates another manner in which the US media repaid on Vietnam War events out of context. A good example of this biased reporting by taking events out of context can be seen during the famous Tet offensive in 1968 when the Vietcong launched a major offensive against the South Vietnamese. The offensive was repelled quite effectively, however, in the process four American planes were shot down. While the crashes and burning wrecks were widely broadcasted on American television creating a very vivid and lasting impression in the minds of millions of US viewers, the US media said very little about the successful stopping of a major Vietcong offensive. To make matters worse, General Westmoreland had been reassuring the press about how weak the Vietcong were and just one month earlier he had assured the American public that the war had almost been won. Instead of broadcasting the successful defeat of the Vietcong in a major battle, the US media broadcast images of the bodies of Vietcong soldiers who had breached the security perimeter of the American Embassy (Caputo 74). This is yet another example of US media reporting on events out of context, with the US media only focused on the failings of the US military and not the fact that the US military managed to effectively repel a major offensive. This led the American public to doubt General Westmoreland's earlier statement about America's military success in Vietnam and question how weak the Vietcong actually were.

It is important to note that while the US media reported on events out of context in their reporting of the Tet Offensive, they still very much supported the American war effort in Vietnam. This support, however, changed following the Tet Offensive. An example of this change support can be seen when looking at statistics of the percentage
of battles reported by the US media as US military victories. Before the Tet Offensive, the US media classified approximately 62% of the battles as being US military victories and 28% as being US military defeats (Hallin 146). The low number of battles classified as US military defeats is a clear example of the US media’s support for the US military in Vietnam. The statistics are important because many of the battles and skirmishes in the jungles of Vietnam are not black and white and it becomes hard to determine which side is actually the victor. For example, is the victor the side which had the fewest casualties or the side which has gained the most territory? Following the Tet Offensive, the US media classified only approximately 44% of the battles as being US military victories while reporting US military defeats in 32% of the battles (Hallin 146). The decrease in the number of battles being classified by the US media as US military victories, from 62% to 44%, and the increase in the number of battles being classified by the US media as US military defeats, from 28% to 32%, was most likely not due to the Vietcong getting stronger, in fact after the Tet Offensive the Vietcong were notably weaker, but rather US reporters becoming more scrutinizing with respect to US victories. It appears as if prior to the Tet Offensive the US media was more willing to give the US military the benefit of the doubt if there was a question as to whether the US military won a particular battle while after the Tet Offensive the US media appeared to give the Vietcong that benefit.

This contradicts the earlier comment about reporting of defeats.

Again, rather contradictory.

This might be an interesting argument but needs better support - perhaps with more examination of what battles were being classified as "victories/defeats"? Guerrilla warfare was rarely so straightforward. Perhaps this should be mentioned.
One of the most important reasons the US media did not take into proper context certain events in their reporting on the Vietnam War was due to the general lack of experience that US field reporters in Vietnam and US reporters in the US had with respect to warfare. General Westmoreland suggests this when he said that "Fifty-one percent [of all reporters] were twenty-nine" (Hammond 1). This illustrates that the vast majority of reporters in Vietnam probably did not have much experience in the field, and probably even less experience covering Warfare, because the only then recent war before the Vietnam War was the Korean War and most reporters active in reporting on the Vietnam War would not have been old enough to report on the Korean War when it was ongoing. A good example of US reporters not taking into proper context certain events in their reporting on the Vietnam War due to their general lack of experience are two reporters who witnessed American troops using tear gas during the Vietnam War. The reporters were not aware that tear gas was permitted by the Geneva convention, and therefore was allowed to be used in the Vietnam War. After witnessing the use of the tear gas, the reporters published an article claiming that the American troops were using chemical weapons, creating a significant amount of negative sentiment within the United States (Braestrup 15). This illustrates how the US media's lack of experience can lead to events being reported out of context and resulting in negative sentiment since the media is not always aware of the military protocol.

Rather a limited perspective given the Algerian War; the Congolese civil war; the Cuban revolution etc. reporters may have gained experience. Sources need evaluating... General Westmorland, for example.
Another factor that caused the events in the Vietnam War to be reported on out of context is the impact of television. It is important to understand the tremendous impact of television before we can actually look at the effects that it had on the American public. In 1950, only 9% of homeowners owned a television. In 1966, however, almost 93% of all homeowners owned a television (Bonior, Champlin, Kolly 4-5). These figures are further supported by the fact that in 1964, 58% of all people in America listed television as their primary source of information (Halil 106). This illustrates the importance of television as a resource at the time for keeping the American people informed. Given the importance of television to the American people at the time, anything reported about the Vietnam War on television had a powerful influence on the attitude of the American people about the war. Marshall McLuhan supported this in 1975 when he said "Television brought the brutality of war into the comfort of the American living room. Vietnam was fought in the living rooms of America, not on the battlefields of Vietnam (The Media and the Vietnam War, Truthful or Deceptive). A good example of television being used as a medium for reporting events taken out of context during the Vietnam War is the film of the Cam Ne incident. The Cam Ne film shows American marines setting a village house on fire with no visible threat or opposition, creating the impression to the American public that the US military was cruel and inhumane. The film did not reveal the fact that the reason the marines were burning down the village house was to prevent the sniper fire and other assaults on the US military which had cost the US military a significant number of casualties. However, the most important impact of television is that it brought images of war...
into American households on a
regular basis, American households that were completely unprepared for the horrors of
war. At the time, approximately 22% of all television coverage of the Vietnam War
showed combat
(Hallin 129). While this may seem low, one must consider the fact that TV coverage of the
Vietnam war was very prominent, so the 22% actually amounts to a sizable amount of
combat coverage. This relatively large amount of combat coverage in a sense takes the
combats being covered out of context because television coverage rarely had time to
give background to the events giving rise to the combat or combats being shown on
television (Hallin 209). It is easy to see how the American public could easily and very
quickly become very negative about the Vietnam War as they were regularly exposed
in their unprepared homes to the harsh realities of
war without many of the mitigating factors of which they would have been informed had the
combats been shown in context. The US media's focus on the sensational My Lai massacre
incident, and their reporting about the incident illustrates how the US media reported on the
event out of context. In the Mai-Lai massacre, a platoon under the command of Lieutenant
William Calley was ordered to go to the My Lai village to search for weapons and Vietcong
who were purportedly hiding in the village.
Several members of the platoon's squad had been killed in the clays before reaching My Lai
through a series of booby traps and regular sniper fire, although they never saw their enemy,
presumably causing the members of the platoon to be nervous, frustrated and frightened.
Upon reaching the village, the platoon began firing on the elderly, women and children.
Casualties have been reported to have been as high as 500. The incident was kept secret for a
year until an independent investigative journalist uncovered the story in 1969 (Trueman).
Articles from that time show the negative view that journalists had of the isolated incident, something that can be seen in a newspaper article written in the St. Louis Post dispatch titled "Lieutenant Accused of Murdering 109 Civilians" ("Lieutenant Accused of Murdering"). The article depicts and emphasizes the cruelty of the US soldiers in My Lai with none of the soldiers taking any action to seek to stop the massacre. The article also does not mention the isolated nature of the incident.

The article uses words such as "pre-meditated" and "mass murder" to convey the opinion of the journalist. However, there were other opinions about the incident at the time. For example,

A B C's Howard K. Smith said "My Lai was for Americans an exceptional horror .... My Lais for the other side are a daily way of life" (Hallin 180). This illustrates how events can be reported on out of context, with different news agencies focusing on different aspects of the same story. The overall effect of the reporting on My Lai was that it raised the question of who were actually the bad guys in the Vietnam War (Simkin).

The ability of the US media to publish uncensored photographs of the Vietnam War was a major factor that led to many of the Vietnam War events being reported on out of context.

The power of a photograph lies in the fact that the interpretation of it is very much based on the viewer's interpretation of the picture. One can see the power of photographs by looking at one of the most influential pictures published during the Vietnam war, depicted below as Figure 1. The picture shows a Vietnamese peasant village under attack from a napalm strike.

In the foreground of the picture, there is a young naked girl running and screaming.

This one picture had a tremendous impact on the manner in which many people...
viewed the war because they began to realize in vivid detail how horrendously the war impacted the people of Vietnam.

It is important to note that the power that is derived from a picture comes from the ability for a picture to be interpreted in the wrong way and taken out of the context in which the photograph was taken. A good example would be the photograph (Figure 2) below titled "Murder of a Vietcong by Saigon Police Chief", which was taken by Eddie Adams in 1968. The photograph shows an unarmed civilian being shot in cold blood. The power of this photograph lies in the fact that when viewed alone, no context is provided to help the viewer understand the circumstances giving rise to the photograph, allowing viewers to come to their own conclusions. Viewing the picture as it is, it is easy to understand how viewers could draw the conclusion that this is yet another example of how cruel and barbaric those participating in the Vietnam War are and use this as yet another example of why the United States should not be involved in the Vietnam War. The context in which the photograph was taken, however, provides a very different picture. The photograph was taken the day after the assault of the Vietcong during the Tet Offensive. The man being shot had just murdered dozens of unarmed civilians that day. Eddie Adams, the man who took the photograph, summed up the power of photographs saying "Still photographs are the most powerful weapons in the world" (Adams). This demonstrates one of the most powerful tools used by journalists, which led to certain events being reported on out of context. The effect that this had was that the American people were often left to themselves to interpret shocking images, which they may have interpreted differently, or at least perhaps less harshly, had the photographs been accompanied by the full story giving rise

Was the photo of the young girl taken out of context?

What impact did this have? Whatever the context, it is a young man being shot in cold blood by a member of the S. Vietnam police.
to the picture and not left to the interpretation of the viewer.

Figure 1:

Not a very sound argument. Selective use of material interpreted to build an argument - not very sound History.

Figure 2:

Correct referencing needed
One of the most important ways in which the Vietnam War was reported on out of context was the fact that the US media focused primarily on very specific events such as recent battles, burning villages or the killing of innocent civilians, only rarely reporting on the broader issues which gave rise to the revolution and war and the reasons why some believed the United States needed to be in the war. This was a result of a variety of factors that stopped news agencies from talking about the more complex issues. Firstly, the US media covering the Vietnam War on the ground in Vietnam had a very different culture than the Vietnamese people with whom they interacted, making it difficult for the journalists to relate to the people about whom they were reporting. Secondly, the US media had a significant language barrier to overcome, making it very difficult for them to understand local populations. Finally, one of the most important factors is the fact that individual journalists tended to spend only a limited amount of time in Vietnam, often spending only six months there before returning home. This made it very difficult for them to cover any but the simplest issues even if they were able to overcome the language and cultural barriers mentioned above. In an interview with Ed Fowly, he cited limited amount of time as the factor why events cannot be looked at in extensive detail (Hallin 206). The result was that by not reporting on the more complex issues and focusing instead only on battles, conflicts, apparent injustices and cruelty which sold newspapers and television advertising space, the American public and most of the US media were not able to put the very complex and difficult war into context where they could easily identify the reasons why the United States joined the war, why the war developed differently than previous wars and the reason why the United States should still be engaged in the conflict.

A tenuous argument - not supported.
At the time of the Vietnam War, there was a lot of pressure on various media outlets and reporters to focus on sensational stories, often leading to the reporting of events out of context and in many cases being manipulated by various media outlets such as television, radio and newspapers. During the Vietnam War, the various media outlets such as television, radio and newspapers competed with each other to try to report on information that was more sensational than the information of their competitors. This competition and the pressure, which they caused on employees, however, often led to information being inaccurate, or information being reported on out of context. This intense competition also existed among the reporters covering the Vietnam War because many of them did not have stable long-term positions of employment with the news agencies for which they happened to be working at the time. For example; at the time there were 42 New York Times correspondents in Saigon who were all competing to publish the 18-22 articles, which had been reserved in each edition for foreign news (Braestrup 44). This put a tremendous amount of pressure on the correspondents, often pushing them to publish stories taken out of context, in an attempt to outdo their competitors. During the Vietnam War, combat footage and reports were the most popular with the American public. For example, CBS' Bureau manager made mention of some footage produced about an isolated firefight in an insignificant hamlet in Vietnam in which only one American was killed (Braestrup 36). While the death of the young soldier is tragic, given the number of other soldiers, which had been killed in much more dramatic and significant battles, the significance of his death is relatively low. The US media's focus on the incident, however, distracted viewers away from some of the larger issues raised by the war and placing such a strong focus on the event took the event out of context. By doing this, the American public was continually presented with depressing news day
after day, that in the scheme of things was not very important, but was made important because of the media.

In conclusion, it is important to understand that at different times of the war the media took more events out of context than others with different effects on the American public. My research has shown that a wide variety of factors are responsible for leading the media to report on Vietnam War events out of context. Factors such as much of the war information coming from the US government, the lack of experienced reporters and reporters who could understand the Vietnamese language and culture, the impact of television and photographs; the media's lack of willingness to address larger questions; the pressure on US correspondents to report on dramatic stories and the competition among the US media to report on sensational stories. All of these factor's resulted in the media often unknowingly taking the Vietnam War out of context, resulting in the American public not fully understanding the war, having largely a negative reaction to the war which increased over time and ultimately resulting in widespread protests and opposition. It is also important to note that the lack of censorship by the American government and the American government's own hesitations about informing the journalists about the Vietnam War also played an important role in the outcome of the war.

An assertive essay that demonstrates limited critical thinking - arguments are not well supported. No evaluation of sources - other than the implicit very negative evaluation of US media reporting on Vietnam.
Works Cited


