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The Tet Offensive in American media

In March of 1968, US president Lyndon Johnson sent the Marine Corps into South Vietnam thereby beginning the American intervention in that country. As the conflict intensified, also more journalists were sent to the region. In January 1968, there were as many as half a million American soldiers there and 464 accredited journalists from different countries, including 179 American. The real number of journalists is not accurate, however, as easily accredited were any members of TV crews, back-up personnel and even family members. It can be said that, in reality, there were about 60 journalists, representing the largest American media; information agencies, national TV stations and the press¹.

Most correspondents dealt with the same topics and analysed the competition's reports, ie. Associated Press (AP) vs. United Press International (UPI) or "Time" vs. "Newsweek". For the majority, it was an "American war" and, hence, most of the news was devoted to aspects of American presence there. Journalists, present in the Vietnam for several months, did not know the local language, history or geography of the country they were writing about. Most of them were not familiar with military operations or jargon used in official communiqués coming from the headquarters in Saigon². They had to learn on the spot but as can be seen from their reports, many of them were did not prepare enough³.

The majority of TV correspondents worked in Vietnam for no longer than several months, although some came back several times, while directors stayed no longer than one year⁴.

Most popular TV reports showed American boys "in action". The news briefs were usually created from information taken from press agencies and read by a lector thousands of miles away from action. Out of several hundred reports made during the Tet Offensive only a fraction was presented by correspondents. This was so for practical reasons. Direct satellite transmission was expensive and, therefore, rarely used. The time between filming of an event and its broadcast was, on the average, 48 hours. That is why correspondents created materials from what was in the press, even if it was several days old. TV networks relied on press agency materials rather than on their own few, busy correspondents. Their job was to obtain and create 'standard' scenes transmitted in short fragments during the news with supporting commentary. The images were presented as 'typical situations' and not as part of a larger picture. Commentary was more 'personal' and 'unambiguous' than in other media. This often resulted in controversy, like the material shown by CBS on August 5, 1965, from Cam Ne village. It showed a group of Marines setting houses on fire in revenge. Filmed were village

¹ UPI and AP, servicing over 1200 press title and over 3000 radio and TV stations, employed 8 reporters, the largest TV stations, NBC and CBS – 6, ABC – 4, the press "New York Times" – 4, "Washington Post" – 2; "Time" – 6 and "Newsweek" – 4 reporters. From: P. Braestrup, *Big Story. How the American Press and TV Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 Vietnam and Washington*, Boulder, CO 1977, p. 10.

² Journalists had problems understanding guerilla war and its complicated reality and describing it in words. Many were shocked by the brutality of war and could not objectively rate the situation, which was particularly visible in TV reports. Although access to battlefields was easy, only a few reporters decided to risk their lives.

³ Right before the January 1968 outbreak, there were very few veteran reporters, such as Charles Mohr from "New York Times" (in Vietnam since 1963) or Peter Arnett (since 1962), on the spot.

⁴ The role of TV in the US as a basic source of information has been increasing since the 1960s. In 1964, 58% of respondents chose it as a primary source, 56% chose press and 26% - radio. From D.C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War*, New York, 1986, p. 106. People trusted TV more than other sources as they could see the presenters (Walter Cronkite was the most trusted journalist in America), see the image and hear the sound, in a way they could directly take part in the events.

people in despair, mainly women and children. Additionally, there was an emotional commentary by CBS' Morley Safer who emphasized the negative effects of such actions on American activity in Vietnam. The critics pointed out lack of context in the report, "Safer's commentary did not include background information, meaning the Cam Ne July incident where several Marines were shot and killed, the mines, the traps and the fire from the village. [...] All viewers saw was senseless destruction and lack of respect for the lives of innocent people", stated Guenter Levy in his book, *America in Vietnam*⁵. This CBS report is just one example of the difficulties journalists encountered in their description of unconventional war in which civilians were often treated unfairly.

TV stations, just like most other media, were supportive of American military activity in Vietnam. Nevertheless, broadcasted were also reports showing American soldiers in negative light between 1965–1968, frustration with the war of attrition and decreasing morale among the soldiers. According to statistics, before the Tet offensive in the media 62% of reports from activity showed Americans winning⁶, while 28% - the Communists prevailing and 2% – unresolved clashes. After Tet, the percentages were as follows: 44% - won, 32% - lost and 24% – unresolved⁷.

Press agencies had a great influence on TV producers. Their 50-600 word communiqués, edited in the New York headquarters, were the basic source of information for the American public. Always under acute time pressure, the agencies did not analyse or correct mistakes occurring, especially since the situation was continually changing. For agency reporters, deadlines and the necessity to keep passing on information meant that they often had to run to the phone and transmit information when in the meantime the news was already different. The information was then recorded in Saigon, combined with other news and send via telex to Tokyo, Manila or Singapore and then to the US. The news kept on coming, new headlines one after the next, paragraphs explaining or correcting previous information and so on. AP and UPI competed with each other for front page headlines but the journalists employed by the agencies were not capable of reporting on all the events during the Communist offensive. They focused on select subjects and were limited to a few places where fighting was taking place. It is inevitable that their reports included errors or distortions, mostly as a result of the text editing process in New York agencies.

Among the most influential dailies there were "The New York Times" ("NYT") and "Washington Post" ("WP"). "NYT" used either AP or Reuters services or created their own materials 'on the spot', describing the military and political situations in more detail than a press agency would. Its journalists were considered the best in Saigon. However, the foreign affairs department in the New York office lacked experts specializing in Vietnam. The materials coming from Saigon often had to be abridged but editors did not always understand the complexity of issues presented. Some of them were anti-war which undoubtedly influenced the types of articles or the choice of photos printed⁸. The same can be said regarding "WP" in Washington.

Weeklies such as "Time" or "Newsweek" were also pressed for time and space (constrained to several hundred words per text). The process of writing an article was a collaborate one as it included reporters in Vietnam and the offices in New York. Every week offices in Saigon sent lists of proposed subjects for articles which were then reviewed and/or altered by the headquarters. Reporters in Vietnam had until Friday to send in their articles, roughly 2000 words in length. In New York, the editor (aided by an expert) created a final

⁵ G. Levy, *America in Vietnam*, New York 1978, p. 53.

⁶ Allied forces are: American, South Vietnamese, South Korean, Australian, New Zealand, and Tai armies.

⁷ D.C. Hallin, *The Uncensored...*, p. 146.

⁸ Harrison Salisbury was openly against the Johnson administration. His articles from Hanoi, from December 1966, about Americans bombing civilian targets created lots of controversy.

version using other sources. A report was created, up to 800 words, which was then edited by the foreign affairs department and chief editors. Any supplements or changes had to be sent in from Saigon to New York by Saturday morning. The article, targeted at an average reader, had to include a report from events of the week in a clear-cut, concise and attention grabbing way. Due to a few days long distribution, the articles had to, in a way, 'anticipate' the turn of events. The focus was on the most important events and their consequences, even though the situation may have not been resolved yet. This kind of approach, based on thesis, subject analysis and prediction was bound to result in inaccuracies. During the Tet offensive, there was an even larger than before error percentage. In the early part of the war, "Time" was optimistic regarding American involvement, however, this trend was reversed in late 1967. "Newsweek", similarly to most other media, did not have a uniform attitude to the war but after the onset of Tet it also adopted a much more pessimistic and anti-war stance.

An indispensable source of information for journalists in Vietnam was JUSPAO (Joint United States Public Affairs Office) located in Saigon. Another was the Information Bureau at American headquarters in Saigon, MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam)⁹. As the conflict accelerated what became more apparent was the *credibility gap*, or lack of trust for official information or administration communiqués. MACV chief, gen. William Westmoreland, was under a lot of pressure from the White House to present the war in a positive light. Since he was part of the administration, he was generally not trusted and his information was considered unreliable. However, journalists often had to use his information as there was no other available.

The Vietnam war was the first war during which there was no military censorship. MACV considered it but in the end it was decided that it was impractical. Accredited reporters with American forces could go anywhere and write almost anything. There were only 15 rules regarding categories of information which had to be approved by MACV, such as military movements or the number of casualties. If anyone breached those, he could be suspended in his duties but it happened extremely rarely. War critics, those blaming media for 'losing the war', claim that lack of censorship was a big mistake. This did not happen again; in Grenada, the media were excluded and during the Falkland War they were much restricted by the British. It seems that the Vietnam experience led Americans to introduce censorship during the 1st Persian Gulf War in 1991.

Travelling around a war ridden country and reporting required physical stamina and was extremely time consuming¹⁰. Transmitting information took place through military lines, it was also time consuming and difficult. If his employer paid, a journalist could send materials from Saigon to his home office via telex. A direct telephone line was introduced in 1972. Film materials were sent to the US in military or commercial planes.

⁹ JUSPAO was in charge of "psychological operations" and propaganda. It helped media logistically, getting them seats on transport planes or transcripts of communist documents or articles from Saigon press. Information Bureau prepared daily war communiqués and organized *Five O'Clock Follies*. Information could also be obtained from American embassy in Saigon or from government agencies such as USAID (United States Agency for International Development) or CORDS (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support), about the situation outside the cities. USAID also carried out various socio-economic aid programmes, while CORDS integrated pacifist activity of all military and civil structures. Vietnamese sources, ie. government bulletins in English or ARVN communiqués were not of media interest.

¹⁰ In order to reach a Marines base up North, a reporter would have to wake up before dawn and catch the transport plane to Da Nang "There he spent the night at the press centre, at dawn caught the plane to Dong Ha plane and hope to catch a helicopter from there. [...] On the way back, in Da Nang he would have to dictate his material to the office in Saigon. Writing the article would take 72 hours of more. During Tet, when planes were delayed, it took even more time. Additionally, exhaustion changes people's perspective." From: P. Braestrup, *Big Story...*, p. 21.

It needs to be noted that in the US 1968 was an election year. Up until December 1967, 16 000 American lives were lost in the war which cost tax payers 75 bln dollars and the end was nowhere near. These facts shaped the election campaign. Right before the Tet offensive was launched, on January 23rd, the North Vietnamese attacked and overtook the American spy ship USS "Pueblo". This event, so painful to American prestige, dominated the headlines for quite some time and was considered top news up until the first wave of Tet attacks.

All this came as a shock to American public opinion as up until then they were under the impression of a 'success campaign' since autumn 1967 carried out by the administration to gain support for their 'limited war' policy. At a press conference, on November 17th, president L. Johnson convinced Americans that 'progress is being made' in Vietnam. That was a serious mistake, just as was lack of warning about escalation of fighting. Johnson had access to intelligence information so he was aware but did not share this with the public. This was to backfire on him shortly. Similar was Westmoreland's tone. On November 21st, at the National Press Club in Washington he presented his "Report on progress" in which he stated, "I'm absolutely sure that even if the enemy was winning in 1965, this is surely not so today". His statements made headlines but later he was sharply criticized by the media.

On the night of January 20th, the Khe Sanh American Marine base near the Laos and North Vietnam border was attacked. It was the beginning of an offensive which lasted 77 days. Around the country people were getting ready for the Tet holiday (the lunar New Year), visiting relatives and friends. In Saigon, there were traditional fireworks welcoming the Year of the Monkey. It was an unwritten rule that during Tet there was a ceasefire, honoured by both sides. That year, South-Vietnamese president, Thieu, disregarded American intelligence warnings and allowed his soldiers to take a holiday. At the time of the attack, 50% of South Vietnam Army (ARVN) soldiers and officers were on leave. Although Americans called off the ceasefire on January 30th, that was not enough, for example the 716 Gendarmerie Battalion defending 130 American installations around Saigon had only 30% of the force on duty. The press attention was on the bases centered around the Khe Sanh village.

Early morning, January 30th, the Vietcong (VC) and Vietnamese People's Army (VPA) began the first wave of attacks storming American bases and centres in the north. Although there were communiqués of a 'serious situation', there was no curfew hour established in Saigon and most government officials were outside the city. There was information on the attacks in American press but the focus was still on USS "Pueblo".

Around midnight, a 19 member VC sapper unit entered the area of the American embassy via a hole blown up in the wall. The attackers fired grenade launchers at an 8 storey high office building but were unable to get inside. Eventually, they retreated to the courtyard, hid behind concrete flower stands and were finally defeated six hours later. At 8.35 helicopters dropped off paratroopers to fight the rest of Vietcong. A while later gendarmes entered the courtyard via the main gate. A TV team which followed them managed to film the final scene in which the last attacker was killed by an embassy employee at the back of the building.

The scale of the attack on the embassy was minute in comparison to other targets in Saigon, such as the President's Palace or the Tan Son Nhut air base but it was symbolic. After all, the symbol of American presence in Vietnam was attacked and almost overtaken. The embassy was located only several hundred metres from media headquarters and this had its consequences. In all the commotion, some information indicated that the building was taken over. Corrections were following slowly and astonished journalists were ready to believe the worst. Many of them gathered round at dawn at the corner, a 100 metres from the embassy, where they could see only the top floors and the roof. They could not tell what was going on and only heard the fighting. The same was with the 716 Battalion, although they could not see

the action, some informed journalists that VC was inside the building¹¹. Around 9.45 Westmoreland and other American officials arrived and a quick press conference was organized, later aired on CBS News “Special Report”. The general, with casualties and explosions in the background, announced that attackers only entered the courtyard and did not force the inside of the building. Seeing the above, some journalists were skeptical. One of them said, “Reporters could not believe their own ears. Westmoreland was in the middle of all the destruction claiming that everything was under control.” A “WP” correspondent stated, “we walked away shaking our heads in disbelief. For journalists, a raid on the embassy was a dramatic and humiliating blow in the heart of American presence in Vietnam. How can Westmoreland continue to be so optimistic?”

Information on the embassy attack dominated agency news. AP, quoting gendarmes, informed that, “VC took control of part of the embassy”, this version was upheld for several hours until it was corrected at 6 am (New York time). These reports resulted in East coast dailies and late night West coast news offering contradictory information which created the impression that VC took over the building and that Westmoreland was lying. UPI released its bulletin 40 minutes after AP, around 15.00. First, it denied that VC was inside the embassy but later it said that the embassy was taken over, which was officially rejected by the Department of State. In the end, UPI withdrew this information but it was too late for East coast press. Competition between agencies lead to information being released too quickly and with attention grabbing words. In “WP’s” first edition, on January 31st, the headline read, “VC takes over part of American embassy”. Later the daily informed, without changing the headline, that it was not the embassy ‘building’ but the ‘area’. The article included a sentence that, “many people in the vicinity of the embassy said that several attackers entered the lower floors of the building”. Also “NYT”, using “Reuters” information, reported that “VC squad took control of part of the embassy” and occupied it for six hours. It did not say, however, what happened to the embassy building in the end, leaving readers in speculation. The next day, it was explicitly stated that the attackers did not manage to enter the building.

TV stations could not count on broadcasting the fighting so they also used news agencies’ information, read by newscasters from scripts. The largest stations aired incorrect information from early AP and UPI reports on the embassy taken over. Chet Huntley, in NBC’s evening news said, “in the nearby building and on the roofs there are snipers shooting at American embassy personnel inside. We have information that 20 suicide commandoes are on the first floor of the building”. It was several hours later, after the existing film materials arrived, that corrections were broadcasted.

The embassy attack, reported on by the media, was shocking. Not only the fighting was symbolic and dramatic but it could also be observed by journalists. One of them stated, “It was all great, sensational material, the paratroopers jumping out of helicopters, the gendarmerie screams, the VC partisan bodies lying around flower beds. What more could readers and viewers want?”¹².

The bold, although badly planned and executed raid of little military significance was aimed to get Vietnamese attention. It, however, had a greater influence on American public opinion and, paradoxically, it was considered as one of the most crucial Vietnam war actions. Initially, the Communists considered the attack a failure but they changed their opinion after seeing the media reaction in the US and later used it as propaganda. For many journalists, the attack on the embassy contradicted all the supposed progress that was being made and propagated by the Johnson administration. “What the hell is happening” I thought we were winning this war!” - said Walter Cronkite when the first embassy reports came in to CBS’

¹¹ “The gendarmerie captain told me with absolute certainty, when I asked whether VC was inside the building, “My God, yes,..., we are under fire...” – stated Peter Arnett. From: P. Braestrup, *Big Story...*, p. 82.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 109.

newsroom¹³. Many journalists in Saigon were of the opinion that the administration was focusing on correcting and denying the agency information too much. That was a mistake as many later thought that this sudden attack was, in the end, the Communists' 'psychological' victory, even though they may not have known it at the time.

In early February, transmissions from Saigon were dominated by descriptions of destruction, fires, hospitals full of casualties and displaced refugees. All this could be seen from the Caravelle Hotel terrace where many journalists lived. This was shocking as Saigon was considered to be a safe place, except for a couple of minor terrorist attacks. Most of the fighting took place in the suburbs and in the Chinese Cholon district. Journalists, in order to obtain 'front page material', often found themselves in the centre of the fighting which only intensified the feeling of risk and shock¹⁴.

The reality was that the media were generally one sided. On February 1st, near the An Quang pagoda in Saigon, an AP reporter, Eddie Adams and NBC crew registered an appalling scene of execution. Chief of police, gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan, put a revolver to a captured VC officer's head and shot him in front of bystanders. The prisoner, with a horrified look on his face, fell to the ground, with blood gushing out everywhere. Loan came up to journalists and said, "they killed many of my men and many Americans". Adams' photos made front page news for which he later won the Pulitzer prize. Additionally, a 52 second film of the execution was aired by NBC on the "Huntley-Brinkley Report" which was viewed by 20 million Americans. These are just taken out of context examples of shocking reality which media made use of. After watching such scenes, could Americans still believe that their country was involved in Vietnam for a just cause?

There were blown out of proportion reports on destruction of southern cities which were never correct by no longer interested in the subject media. When, in early February, JUSPAO organized a helicopter ride over Saigon for journalists, it turned out that the city did not suffer greatly. Charles Mohr from "NYT" wrote, "there is not much destruction in the city even though fighting here lasted for two weeks. [...] From the ground it looks much worse, like Dresno during WWII, but it turns out that the size of the devastated area is 500-700 square metres"¹⁵. His report made front page news. Another symbol of destructive activity became the words of an American officer, published in a report by Peter Arnett, in AP's February 7th bulletin. He commented on the destruction of Ben Tre in the Mekong delta saying, "it was necessary to destroy the city in order to save it". This quote became a universal Vietnam war description in 1968 which played on people's emotions and dominated public debate for some time.

The February media reports on the destruction of cities and people's despair were additionally enhanced by the following agencies' communiqués, TV reports and "Newsweek" articles. In a way, it was a typical journalist reaction to human suffering and despair, intensified by authentic shock which people felt as more and more cities were destroyed. For many reporters, it was the first time they actually saw the brutality of war. Somehow it was different, however, than when American artillery or air force was in action to 'save Vietnam'. When the cities were being bombarded by Communist forces, coupled with other war crimes, it was often ignored by the media. Reports which included information estimating total losses

¹³ This is how many journalists felt in the US. The embassy incident was the most important event of the 2nd day of the Tet offensive in American media, although there were more crucial fights going on in Saigon. Readers and viewers did not obtain reliable information that it is only a part of a greater whole. What is more, some reporters speculated based on information they considered 'anonymous'.

¹⁴ Destruction and dramatic fate of civilians were what media bosses wanted. They treated the events similarly to natural disasters or riots in American cities. They blamed their own army for the death and the destruction. Rarely do they wrote about attacking and killing VC squads. They believed that communists were using 'selective terror' and often ignored information about their atrocities.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 190.

somehow did not fit the picture earlier offered by media and were, thus, often ignored. This was especially true of TV broadcasts which distorted the overall image and often omitted important events such as regarding military confrontations or Vietnamese people returning to normal life¹⁶.

The situation in Hue, the only large city controlled by Communists, was another topic which media liked to focus on. Hue was a historic city, considered an oasis of peace, of strategic importance with crossing transport routes and supply lines. For Communists, it was good target as it was not protected well because it was close to American bases. Journalists were aware of the situation in Hue and described it in a conventional way. Two Marines battalions aided south-Vietnamese army fight off the enemy and drive them out of the city. The city could be reached via a helicopter or, taking more risk, in a convoy from the Phu Bai Marine base. The Communists fought hard, turning house after house into a stronghold, which lead allied forced to use artillery and air forces. In America, Hue quickly became another symbol of a city which 'had to be destroyed to be saved'. The press even included greatly exaggerated comparisons to Monte Cassino from WW II. It was not even always mentioned that it was the Communists which first attacked the city. This is a text from an AP report, on February 10th, "it is still difficult to estimate the scale of the destruction. After 11 days, there is still a VC flag on the ancient Citadel on the north shore. The armies are making slow progress and the interior of the Citadel continues to be no-man's land. Can the Hue destruction be compared the Kyoto bombing or Acropolis under fire?"¹⁷. TV reports were pathetic in tone. Murray Fromson from CBS described the fate of the city's inhabitants in dramatic words, "For the first time the Vietnamese were witnesses to a true holocaust, a result of conventional war, the destruction is comparable to that in Korea or WW II". He added, "it will be a long time before the city is able to return to normalcy, Hue, a gem in Vietnamese history has been deprived of its splendour."¹⁸. As usual in such situations, TV stations competed with each other for quickest information and the best 'action takes'.

Peter Braestrup, a "WP" reporter, after he accompanied the Marines on the spot, was shocked at the small scale of destruction, "a few holes in walls, some shattered windows and fire marks on houses but no ruins or heaps of rubble [...]. This is because there was no intense fighting here. The destruction is definitely not total"¹⁹. "Newsweek" in an article, *Death of Hue*, traditionally played on readers' emotions, "for 25 days the red and blue VC flag fluttered over Hue. But when the city was finally taken back, after long days of intense fighting, and the enemy's flag pulled down, there were no smiles, kisses or flowers for victors. Americans walking along the streets of Hue saw looks of indifference or hatred. At times, a Vietnamese would spit at the sight of an American". The weekly quoted one city inhabitant, "We understand why you had to do it but the deaths and destruction we will never forgive." The editor added, "The marching Marines saw only destruction from all sides. Nobody knows how many bombs or how much napalm was used. Enough."²⁰ This is the kind of stories, of destruction, casualties and refugees, that agencies, photographers and editors liked to focus on.

¹⁶ „An average viewer watching the news five times a week would see picture showing civilian suffering and destruction of cities 3.9 times a week during Tet (31.01 to 31.03) or four times more than previously (0.85 times a week). The number of films showing casualties increased from 2.4 to 6.8 times a week. It can be said that through television, the war has really become a brutal event.” From D.C. Hallin, *The Uncensored...*, p. 171.

¹⁷ P. Braestrup, *Big Story...*, p. 204.

¹⁸ *Vietnam War with Walter Cronkite*, vol. 2, DVD, 24 June, 2003, "The Tet Offensive".

¹⁹ P. Braestrup, *Big Story...*, p. 204. It is estimated that 40% of the city was destroyed, predominantly wooden housed for the poor in the area of the Citadel.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 209.

During the three week occupation of Hue, the Communists committed massive crimes on soldiers and civilians²¹. American media missed this massacre as agencies only briefly mentioned 'VC terrorism'. During and after the fighting, the exact numbers were unknown. The first mention was by AP, on February 11th, which cited Hue governor's announcement about 300 executed civilians found in a mass grave. The American embassy issued an announcement on March 9th which increased the number of dead to 400 buried in three mass graves. This was either ignored or treated as unreliable information by journalists who considered it government propaganda about Communist atrocities. People still believed in 'VC's selective terror' and it could have been the cause why massacre information was not treated with credibility. Later, there was an investigation in this case by London "Times" reporter, eventually reprinted by "NYT" at the end of March.

After Hue, the media needed a new object to focus on, that was the Khe Sanh siege. The American base, protected by 6 000 Marines and ARVN soldiers, was surrounded by 20 000–40 000 VPA soldiers. Very quickly, journalists began comparing this situation to the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu 14 years earlier even though few similarities could be drawn between the two. Khe Sanh was the only place where allied forces were still defending themselves after several days of the offensive, which was rarely mentioned by media. By focusing on this base, it seems that many journalists believed or suggested that Communists were in control of the country, even long after the offensive failed. As late as March, when VPA troops were retreating, the base, according to media, was still in danger²².

Unfortunately, Johnson administration passiveness did not aid the public in understanding the sense of the Khe Sanh defense, which lead to many speculations. Detailed reports were not easy to obtain for a number of reasons. There was competition for places on planes to the base, there was risk and journalists could only be there for a short period of time. The only reporter who was there the entire time was J. Wheeler from AP. His articles were reliable as they presented facts and the author did not have a catastrophic tone so common to TV reports. AP's competitor, UPI when editing texts in New York had the tendency to exaggerate facts²³.

The media were strongly focused on the 'Dien Bien Phu syndrome', it can even be said that there was a physical resemblance as the geographic terrain was similar. However, militarily the Americans had an advantage since they were armed better and their situation was nowhere near the French. In the US, journalists were fascinated by comparisons to Dien Bien Phu and its possible effect on Johnson's presidency and his war policy. It could have been a major psychological blow, therefore, Johnson was greatly interested in the situation. Not wanting another 'damn Dien Bien Phu', he made his generals sign a paper stating that the base will be defended. There was also much interest and analysis in attempting to understand Communist intentions. What could 'sly Giap', the French vanquisher, want to achieve at Khe Sanh?

TV journalists were not as informed as the press ones. Their visits to Khe Sanh were short and often resulted in rushed conclusions supplementary to 'films of action'. Not being able to film heavy fighting that took place on the hills surrounding the base, they focused on the threat from VPA squads and comparisons to Dien Bien Phu. The long lasting siege

²¹ Communists killed those who were a threat to them. All executions were planned and carried out by VC. The placed were masked well. Victims, with hands tied behind were killed by rifle butts, shot in the head or buried alive. First mass grave was discovered on February 26th, later 18 graves were found. Altogether in Hue and its vicinity 2810 bodies were found, while 2000 are still considered missing. The victims were ARVN soldiers, officials, policemen, Catholic priests, religious leaders and foreigners..

²² The base defense was perfect for media, photo reporters and camera men. A lot of dramatic action was going on there, perfect for registration such as explosions, wounded Marines, plane wrecks or bombers throwing napalm on enemy trenches and hideouts.

²³ Communiqués included sensational tone and attention catching vocabulary.

played on journalist imaginations, especially those from CBS who pressed their correspondents to send reports in regularly. The New York office was not aware of how difficult and risky it was to be inside the base²⁴.

TV crews had little room to maneuver, their cameras predominantly filmed inside the base; car wrecks or marines hiding from being fired at. It was then difficult to create commentary as the journalist responsible for it did not always know what the film was of. They could not contact the Da Nang press centre to make possible corrections²⁵. Some made attempts to predict the battle's outcome, stating, for example, that the base it at the Communists' mercy. One CBS correspondent said, "it is a place in which Americans cannot say that they are in control. It is the North Vietnamese who decide who dies and who lives. They decide if a plane lands or not, and they will have the deciding say about the fate of Khe Sanh"²⁶. Many other journalists presented similar views. They showed wrecks of planes but did not provide people with any statistics. In reality, only one C-130 was destroyed but its wreck was, for a long time, a favourite for photographers and cameramen. Dien Bien Phu comparisons continued. One journalist even went as far as to say that every correspondent on the spot must feel as if 'tormented by Dien Bien Phu'.

Regular press journalists did not report as regularly as agency commentators who sent in their communiqués from Khe Sanh everyday. "NYT" and "WP" reporters wrote extensive articles on the situation in January, based on any information they had. For them, there was not enough action during the siege and they preferred to write about different aspects of Tet. However, for New York offices the siege was front page news as it drew people's attention more than other activity. So journalists wrote about it using any information available, agency news or other second rate sources without even verifying them. It resulted in often contradictory analyses of the situation and in some cases even reports of disaster, not to mention continuing comparisons to Dien Bien Phu.

The main problem was that there was little in-coming new and sensational information coming from the base which lead journalists to various 'predictions' as to what was happening there²⁷. The media devoted so much attention to the 77 day long battle that resulting had to be a distortion of the overall picture of the war. Often other crucial activity, such as ARVN operations or the situations in other cities were ignored. In February and March, "NYT" published 73 articles on the siege, of which 31 were front pare. Out of all the photographs of the Tet offensive, one fifth were pictures from Khe Sanh. Many of them depicted wounded or dead Marines, soldiers under fire, or estimated damage done by the enemy.

On March 18th, "Newsweek" printed a cover page article, *The Khe Sanh Agony*, with a color picture of an American soldier running away from a huge explosion. The article

²⁴ One correspondent, Murray Fromson, found this out the hard way, "He stumbled, fell and hurt his knee jumping out of an airplane. Before he got to Dong Ha [...] he was in the base for three days, longer than most journalists. In Dong Ha, he had to wait another day to get to Phu Bai [...] There, he finally caught a plane to Da Nang from where he could send his film and three reports to Saigon. Like all journalists in Khe Sanh, Fromson could not contact Da Nang, Saigon or his home office. What's worse, he had to deliver his report personally. "Couldn't you give your report to a pilot or another reporter?" [...] When he came back to Saigon, he was informed that the New York office was wondering "why he left Khe Sanh?" From P. Braestrup, *Big Story...*, p. 291.

²⁵ Due to lack of continuous action, reporters only got to observe isolated events. They saw the defense's weak sides and were not aware of attackers' problems. Few mortar explosions to them looked like being under artillery fire. Knowing they were in danger and working under pressure, they often had to speculate on action development.

²⁶ P. Braestrup, *Big Story...*, p. 293.

²⁷ Journalists often used anonymous sources. In reality, what they did is find officers who would support their speculations and conclusions about "another Dien Bien Phu". Such speculations resulted in a wave of protests and warnings from MACV, especially since Khe Sanh often made front page news.

criticized Johnson's Vietnam policy. In that issue, Khe Sanh became a symbol of the war. Interestingly, reporters in Vietnam were not that pessimistic. Merton Perry admitted that being under fire does not make life easy in the base and is nerveracking but, "despite being surrounded, a large majority of the Marines there, from the lowest rank, tired soldier to the commanding lieutenant, David Lownds, are adamant. This is largely due to American military supremacy"²⁸. In June 1968, the base was abandoned by the Marines after all fortifications were destroyed, officially due to a change of military strategy.

Reports created by journalists on the spot often changed shape before they were finally published. Most correspondents tried to be near the battles, dominant were, thus, reports from Saigon, Hue and Khe Sanh, even though, that is not where the majority of American forces were engaged²⁹. Public opinion did not know much about what was going on elsewhere. This was partly due to laconic military communiqués from battlefields. The daily MACV reports did not provide a full picture of what was happening, especially during the early days of the offensive. Editors in Saigon were constantly rushed, they often had only fragmentary information and they had to rely on their own experience and memory, which was not easy working under continuous pressure. Providing a coherent image of the war based on communiqués is hardly possible. These were edited again in American offices, which due to competition, made the news as attractive as possible commercially. It was such information, distorted several times, which made news and was cited time and again.

Military activity by the ARVN army was often ignored altogether as it was of little interest to American public. As mentioned earlier, the majority of journalists did not have extensive knowledge of Vietnam or its inhabitants. Reports on ARVN activity were stereotypical and often even incorrect. Unfortunately, instead of real reports, dominant were clichés such as the earlier discussed prisoner execution. Such reports or pictures were more popular because they were dramatic³⁰.

American media highly rated Communist activity during the Tet offensive, even though its commanders made many tactical errors and did not take full advantage of the 'surprise' factor. Journalists did not point this out as they did not have enough military experience or did not understand the specificity of this war. The media often mentioned the possibility of "another Dien Bienh Phu", or the Communists' "readiness to die", or their "political slyness" in attacking cities and their unlimited human resources. Criticisms of American activity were not balanced. Also, the politicians' not always truthful answers praising the enemy did not help. Among journalists there were subjective reports as a result of shock of the offensive and personal risk involved. It was also pay back time for administration's autumn 'success campaign' and misleading the public opinion³¹. Unfortunately, it was predominantly the media which upheld the erroneous belief that the first wave of attacks had created great problems for allied forces and that the enemy was superior in many aspects, taking the initiative and outwitting allied commanders.

²⁸ P. Braestrup, *Big Story...*, p. 333.

²⁹ These battles created the image of war, in which South Vietnamese army involvement was minimal and in which Americans fought hard and often unresolved battles. The result was a wrong impression that until the end of March the outcome of the battle was unknown.

³⁰ "TV reports from the war showed a one sided view of the war. Generally, VC did not cooperate with any Western media, hence their actions were rarely seen by the public while, for example, ARVN's brutal treatment of prisoners was often broadcasted on American TV. [...] In consequence, viewers saw one sided image of the conflict". From G. Levy, *America...*, p. 433.

³¹ The media focused on anticipating enemy activity, which was more interesting than writing about the past or analyzing the present situation. In Washington, reporters focused on political aspects of the war since the Vietnam conflict was a "political war" for them. Their reports focused repercussion and Hanoi's political strategy instead of military aspects of action. Generally, there was a lack of reliable and critical analyses of enemy activity.

What influence did the Tet offensive and the way it was reported have on the Johnson administration? It made many mistakes, especially the president, not warning Americans of the coming attacks and convincing them that progress was being made. Moreover, there was the USS “Pueblo” crisis as well as turmoil on the domestic political scene. There was a deep split within the Democratic party and within the administration itself. It was apparent now that the White House did not have a strategy for ending the conflict and that the president was reluctant to fully inform the public about the inferred costs and all the unknowns. Uninformed society considered the sudden outbreak of heavy fighting and unknown results a spectacular defeat of allied forces. The headlines, reports, articles and pictures supported this view. It seemed that even the White House and Pentagon did not know exactly what was going on there. The apparent “defeat” was proof of the administration’s shortcomings in running the war. Vivid examples were provided by media every day. It can be said that in this case the media influenced the politicians’ rhetoric and shaped public debate on the war.

During any crisis, the president’s reaction is crucial. At that time, Johnson was not convincing. At the time of intensified fighting, the administration lacked a decisive stance, which was another mistake. During a February 2nd conference at the White House, the president was not optimistic and he seemed tired. He denied the Hanoi announcements of surprise attack (which was not entirely true) and victory. He stated that the Communists were not successful in inciting an uprising but added that the situation is “fluid”. In answering journalist questions, he seemed unsure³². “Many officials have had enough of the “light in the tunnel” vision and were more likely to believe TV and press stories. It was the media which instigated them to criticize the present administration more openly”³³. The White House was defensive at the time and Johnson was mentally tired of the war. Unsuccessfully, he tried to convince and unite public opinion. He focused on the need to oppose Communists but he was not precise as to how and what means need to be applied. He was not convincing in his explanations on the changing situation in Vietnam and he did not make any imperative decisions. On March 31st, he made an announcement that he would not run for president again. This meant the end of his political career.

Lack of credible information about the war resulted in media and public opinion believing the most critical judgments of the Johnson administration. “If we expected the attacks, why were we so astonished by them” – asked one “Baltimore Sun” journalist. “Something very bad has happened and it is not possible to be indifferent or to explain it with unconvincing arguments, as it has been done so far” – wrote “Cleveland Press”. Since there were few official statements issued to the public, many newspapers came to their own conclusions. “St. Louis Post Dispatch” stated that the attacks showed, “how fragile the sovereignty of the Saigon government was, on which Americans relied and how impossible it is to maintain a military advantage”. “NYT” wrote that, “psychological losses are enormous”. Satirist Art Buchwald created a drawing depicting Gen. Custer after his lost battle with the Indians at Little Big Horn with a caption, “We dealt them a final blow. For Sitting Bull it was just an act of despair”.

The chaos around public debate on war in the US was also partly due to a lack of Vietnam experts among both journalists and politicians. Memorable, at that time, was Walter Cronkite’s pessimistic report after his return from Vietnam, on February 27th³⁴. Nine million people heard his solemn commentary to a special report on the Tet offensive consequences.

³² Later on, Johnson made other people present official war announcements and calm public opinion. Unfortunately, they were also shocked by the turn of events and media’s dramatic reports, particularly after Westmoreland’s prediction of a second wave of attacks.

³³ D.C. Hallin, *TheUncensored...*, p. 170.

³⁴ He was in Saigon and Hue for two weeks, conducting interviews with soldiers and civilians on the current situation.

While the film showed the destruction of Saigon, the popular presenter stated that the ruins “in this destroyed, burnt and tired country [...] mean success or failure, victory or defeat depending on who you talk to”. He compared official announcements minimizing defeat with eye witness accounts depicting disaster. He included his personal opinions stating that, “the pacification process has failed” and that South-Vietnamese government “can save the country from total tragedy”. His interviews and film materials seemed to question and undermine all official statements. In the end, he concluded that, “too often we have been disappointed by optimistic reports from our political leaders. To say today that we are closer to victory would mean disbelief in earlier optimism. The only realistic, although disappointing conclusion, is that we are bogged down indefinitely. We are just realizing that the only rational option is to negotiate not as victors but as men of honour who have done what they could to keep their promises and defend democracy”³⁵.

To what extent did media influence public opinion regarding war? Support for the intervention has been declining slowly but steadily since 1965, in view of rising casualties, costs of war and higher taxes. The Gallup survey indicated that between November and February the percentage of Americans believing in victory has decreased from 51% to 32% and people of the opinion that Americans are losing the war increased from 8% to 23%. Within two months after the offensive one in five Americans supporting the war changed his opinion to anti-war. Dominant in February and March disaster scenarios presented by media surely also influenced politicians in Washington, both in the White House and Congress, as well as American soldiers’ morale. “The Tet experience shows us that the image presented by media, that of great crisis in foreign policy, in such circumstances can influence the perception of Washington on the verge of election and its decisions”³⁶.

Did media consider the Tet offensive a Communist victory? As a result of an unexpected change of strategy, preceded by a several months of preparations, the Communists attacked South Vietnamese cities during the holiday ceasefire with 80 000 soldiers. Due to wrong coordination of attacks and commanders’ mistakes, the initial element of surprise was not used to its fullest advantage. The allied forces were quickly able to counterstrike and drive the enemy out of the cities within several days. Civilians, focused on survival, did not support the proclaimed uprising. ARVN, although weakened, managed to continue fighting. The government in Saigon did not collapse, there was no coup d’etat or revolution. It is estimated that during the offensive 50 000 people died on the Communist side and VC lost its best and most experienced people.

Despite that, many journalists were skeptical of Communist defeat and did not believe the huge losses. Those with little war experience were shocked and terrified by what they saw. It was believed that the South Vietnamese experienced the same kind of shock, it was definitely a psychological blow to everyone involved. Over optimistic MACV reports on Hue and Saigon only strengthened the skepticism, just as the over estimated enemy losses based on wrong reports from regional headquarters. Some media either ignored or disbelieved official reports on Communist defeat. Johnson’s uncertain attitude during an early press conference did not help people understand the situation. Administration representatives talked about Communist defeat but rarely mentioned “allied victory”.

When the situation became more clear and it was possible to make assessments, most journalists were still focused on resulting destruction and did not care about Communist losses. Many quickly jumped to analyses, in view of the possibility of another wave of attacks. They were convincing public opinion that the situation could get worse, that

³⁵ J.R. Arnold, *Tet Offensive, 1968: The Turning Point in Vietnam*, London 1990, p. 88. Lyndon Johnson, who used three TV sets in his Oval Office, later said, “It is the end. I’ve lost Walter, I’ve lost the trust of the average citizen”.

³⁶ P. Braestrup, *Big Story...*, p. 505.

Communists have achieved a “great psychological victory” and that their losses are of less importance. As late as mid March, when allied forces launched offensive activity around Saigon, the media began informing the public that Communist threat in cities is decreasing and that our forces are gaining a military advantage.

TV stations broadcasted reports showing the aftermath, in which Communist losses were often ignored. This is how an NBC reporter in Pentagon commented material from February 1st “even the most skeptical American military men are astonished by VC capabilities”³⁷. An ABC commentator criticized the administration for portraying the offensive as the enemy’s act of desperation, “perhaps it is the last desperate attempt. Let’s hope that it is. But it is definitely something entirely different than what American commanders would want or ever expect”³⁸. Walter Cronkite in his report from Saigon on February 14th stated that although, “Vietcong has been defeated”, the future of the Saigon government is uncertain and a coup d’etat is a threat. He was even more pessimistic in his report on March 10th. Describing the fighting in Saigon, he said that although allied forces have defended the city, the psychological victory belongs to Vietcong, since they “entered the very capital”. The conclusion was unambiguous, “in short, the war, according to the administration, has been lost”. Arguments presented in TV programmes played on people’s emotions, especially from the Tet offensive, where death and destruction were so dominant. Ironically, when destruction was shown on TV screens, the remainders of VC and VPA were retreating back to their bases.

On February 9th, “Time” magazine included a North-Vietnamese gen. Giap on its cover and discussed Communist psychological victories. It added that although allied forces suspected attacks on cities, their scale, planning and coordination surprised everyone. “This is also because after five days of fighting they were still holding on to some of what they took control, the Communists have achieved a kind of victory”³⁹. The article estimated losses at 15 000 which made it a pyrrhic victory for North Vietnamese. “Newsweek” was ever more pessimistic. In its issue from February 12th it undermined official announcements of Communist defeat and focused on the political aspects of the offensive, “Westmoreland and his commanders were surprised by the scale and force of the attack. They saw VC goals in a strictly military but not political or psychological context. That is why Communist losses and the fact that they did not hold on to what they initially gained the offensive was considered a unsuccessful. However, the other side of the coin seems even worse. In Hue, VC showed its strength which was a lesson not to be forgotten for its citizens”⁴⁰.

It is doubtful that in February or March journalists had enough information in order to make objective judgments of the Tet offensive outcome. In depth analyses require knowledge of military aspects as well as North Vietnamese goals and capabilities, which to this day is uncertain. Cautious MACV and Washington announcements, aimed at calming public opinion, were skeptically treated by media and generally considered unreliable. Media and journalists did not wait for the situation to clear up. Since Communists incurred heavy losses and did not hold on to their targets, the media focused on their “psychological victory”. It was a heavy blow to the South Vietnamese and a new initiative undertaken. Analyses of the situation published then were full of premature speculations, unsupported by concrete facts. Many journalists simply wanted to take revenge on the administration for their earlier lies. Obviously, most of those assessments did not hold to be true. Most of the main media reports

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 132.

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 133.

³⁹ Ibidem, p. 139.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 140.

during the offensive were far from reality or the truth and they contributed to the image of allied forces defeat, which is criticized by historians and journalists⁴¹.

What were the reasons for this low reliability report level during the offensive? Peter Braestrup in his book, *Big Story*, stated that “exceptional circumstances of the Tet offensive have greatly impacted American journalism. It was too much for commentators, reporters and their superiors and it could happen again”⁴². This direct and sudden contact with brutality and chaos of war, coupled with life threatening experiences shocked most journalists. This was especially visible during the initial fighting in Saigon and attack on American embassy. The national scope and the violent attacks made journalists be unsure of North Vietnamese strength and possible outcome of the offensive. This uncertainty was escalated by little knowledge of both sides’ military might and little knowledge of Vietnamese society⁴³. Unfortunately, in February, most correspondents and reporters did not wait to understand the situation. In result, at the end of the month, when the situation was becoming more clear, “the media were presenting a black image of the war, showing dark illustrations of disaster which only a few journalists attempted to analyse and few editors verified”⁴⁴. Incorrect assessments and rushed analyses from February and March were largely not corrected⁴⁵. Was this the result of sudden increases in anti-war attitudes among especially East coast journalists? This was later criticized by R. Nixon’s Republican administration. According to a conservative journalist Norman Podhoretz, “Tet was an opportunity to openly criticise growing disappointment with the war”⁴⁶.

During Tet, publishers assumed that the surprise attack and shock that followed in Saigon and Washington foreshadowed a turn of events and eventual disaster, and they convinced readers of their opinions⁴⁷. At the end of February, especially after Hue was taken back, there was a chance to describe the ongoing events in more detail, to the advantage of allied forces. Moreover, there was no censorship and it was possible to use military transport to get to battlefields and back. It was also feasible to get information to home offices quickly. Journalists, however, did not see the consequences of the offensive on a larger scale. Their knowledge was incomplete and limited to those places in Vietnam which they visited. Despite

⁴¹ “American press played a decisive role during the offensive. Journalist reports and conclusions were, however, very erroneous. Inexperienced and lazy journalists in comfortable hotels in Saigon were not capable of comprehending how communist units were able to attack. They claimed they had help from civilians. That is just another example of how media disregarded administrative announcements and created their own stories”. From J.R. Arnold, *Tet Offensive...*, p. 88.

⁴² P. Braestrup, *Big Story...*, p. 509.

⁴³ The way reports or news are created is shaped by journalist rules and customs. The media, since 1960s, especially television, have had their ‘themes’ and ‘hits’ in order to report news in a routine way. The Tet offensive did not fit their routine and the situation was more complicate. For reporters in Vietnam, there was always lots of uncertainty and ambiguity. The war has moved from the countryside and jungle to major cities. Journalists did not know how to deal with the situation. *Five o’clock Follies* and MACV communiqués did provide enough information to describe what was going on in different regions of the country.

⁴⁴ P. Braestrup, *Big Story...*, p. 509.

⁴⁵ When, in late 1968 NBC was considering making a documentary showing that Tet was a Communist defeat and that media largely contributed to the image South Vietnamese disaster, the idea was rejected by producers. In their opinion the American public opinion already decided that Tet was a disaster and that it was an American disaster too.

⁴⁶ It is thought that, “for more and more people the war was increasingly unjust. This was especially true for the three most influential circles – the media, the Congress and the Johnson administration. People were hanging on to Tet not because they ceased to believe that the war could be won but because they lost its sense. N. Podhoretz, *Dlaczego byliśmy w Wietnamie?*, Warszawa 1991, p. 130.

⁴⁷ “Influential East coast station and press magnates, as well as many politicians and influential people from Washington began to believe that the war is lost. They started spreading this opinion and the public believed them. In consequence, February and March were the turning point in American opinions on the war. Within two months after the offensive one in five respondents changed his opinion from pro- to anti-war” – summed up a English historian, James Arnold. From J.R. Arnold, *Tet Offensive...*, p. 88.

all that, most publishers in the US bombarded readers with quick and attention grabbing strategies of “sly Giap” and reports on Communists’ psychological victory. What is more, most information from agency services used by press and television was not from direct eye witness reports but from secondary sources.

Such information was further processed in home offices. Conventional journalist strategies were based on “enhancing” content by using effective vocabulary and phrases. This resulted in distortion and falsification of facts within broader context. These were “news” bits but not reliable information about the war. In many editorial offices, the focus was on negative facts, which is particularly visible in the choice of photographs and the opposition to government policy.

The war in Vietnam was the first and only great conflict of the Cold War during which journalists could work freely. Media presence near military action had its consequences. Previous conflicts, such as the war in Korea, or British fighting partisans in the Falklands were not “media wars”. If we take a look at American media activity in Iraq and their limitations, we can conclude that Vietnam was a lesson learned by generals and politicians.