

Nov 04, 2016 by [Lawrence Pintak](#)

The Fog of War (on Cable TV) ^[1]

Napa Valley, CA -- As someone who lives and breathes Middle East politics and media, I have had the strange -- and frustrating -- experience of watching the current conflict play out on U.S. cable television. I am reminded again why Americans have such a limited -- and distorted -- view of the world.

I run a center for television and new media at The American University in Cairo, which puts me at the crossroads of journalism in the Arab world. Normally, monitoring a crisis like this would involve the voracious consumption of Arab and U.S. media -- television, newspapers, websites and all the rest.

But for the first week of this war, I was on vacation in California with my family. That has meant catching glimpses of the conflict in bite-sized snatches on cable television between forays into Disneyland, trips to the beach and aquarium tours, much, I suspect, like many other Americans this summer.

At times, the coverage has seemed as much a fantasy as Disney's Space Mountain and the level of Middle East knowledge on the part of some of the anchors only a few notches higher than that of the tattooed biker couple in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* line.

Take for example, a CNN interview with an American high school student who had been visiting his father's relatives in Lebanon when the conflict broke out. With his tearful American mother in the studio, he was asked by phone whether he was frightened. No big deal, he replied, explaining that he was north of the Christian port of Jounieh, far from the fighting. Betraying her woeful ignorance of Lebanon's geography and politics, the anchor replied that he sounded like a typical "macho" young man who didn't want to worry his mother. The anchor might have looked at a map before going on air.

Hype abounded. "This could be World War Three," more than one reporter was heard to say. The same dramatic images were repeated endlessly, as if on a loop. Rumor was elevated to fact -- and the networks seemed proud of it. One CNN promo showed an unedited sequence in which a nameless photographer told Anderson Cooper, in northern Israel, that there was a rumor of rockets on the way. Cooper then turned to the camera and authoritatively reported, "The police say more rockets are coming." So much for checking sources.

There was plenty of solid, balanced reporting. Nic Robertson in Beirut, Matthew Chance in Gaza and Christiane Amanpour on the Israeli border; CNN anchor and Beirut veteran Jim Clancy, NBC's Martin Fletcher on MSNBC and the handful of others who are based in, or have spent significant time in the region have done yeoman work. The problem comes with those parachuted into the Middle East with little grounding in the region and the anchors back in the studios in London and the U.S. The errors of the uninitiated embeds in Iraq were endlessly repeated.

One example: CBS refugee John Roberts, now CNN's senior correspondent, eruditely pointed to pro-Hezbollah demonstrations in Syria as evidence of a Sunni-Shiite split. The only weakness in that analysis is that Syria is a Sunni nation, so the demonstrations point to exactly the opposite. Over on MSNBC's Hardball, NBC correspondent Dawn Fratangelo's discussion of potential dangers to American evacuees quickly disintegrated into confused talk of Hezbollah rockets in northern Israel. That's the other direction, Dawn.

There was little effort to identify the politics of many of the pseudo-experts who were trotted into the studios. Right-wing Lebanese Christians and representatives of Israeli-backed think tanks were offered up as independent analysts. Anchors and reporters, meanwhile, frequently wore their politics on their sleeve. When an American woman trapped in southern Lebanon decried Washington's failure to stop what she said was Israel's brutal killing of civilians, CNN anchor Tony Harris snapped back, "That's not the view over here" and cut her off, saying he didn't have time to debate the issue.

As is so often the case these days, celebrity reporters themselves frequently became the story. Anderson Cooper spent more time on-camera than the protagonists to the conflict, and MSNBC endlessly looped an outtake of Richard Engel repeatedly blowing his on-camera standup as Israeli bombs fell behind him -- much, I suspect, to his embarrassment. A failure to remain cool under fire is not something to be proud of. NBC anchor Brian Williams made much of the fact that when he went on a helicopter flight with an Israeli officer to take a look at the fighting, "We got closer than we intended." Turns out that some shells landed in the distance. War is Hell, Brian.

Even more troubling was the fact that the Williams segment, along with reports by several other NBC correspondents, ran on Scarborough Country, an overtly politicized MSNBC talk show, further blurring the line between news and opinion that is muddying the waters of cable journalism. Amid segments from such stalwart NBC correspondents as Martin Fletcher, there was Scarborough describing Hezbollah as an "Iran-backed terror group" and throwing former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak softballs like, "Why is it the more Israel is willing to give up to the Palestinians, the more your country comes under attack?" Meanwhile, conservative iconoclast Tucker Carlson, sans bowtie, has been out there "reporting" from the Israeli border, asking real NBC correspondents such loaded questions as, "Do we have any idea whether this city was targeted by Hezbollah because of its Christian population?"

There is plenty of room on cable television for politicized talk shows of all stripes. But by allowing -- or rather ordering -- its respected news correspondents to appear on such shows, the networks are trading credibility for ratings and cementing their transition from purveyors of news to citadels of infotainment.

Lost in the fog of hype and self-aggrandizement on the cable segments I saw was much of the subtle complexity of the conflict, reducing it too often to the black-and-white that has characterized U.S. policy toward the region. My view was one slice of the coverage. I did not see the main network evening newscasts or the morning shows. I grazed cable news -- like so many other Americans do these days -- and came up hungry.

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