



ON THE JOB: British journalists and a US Marine under fire in Baghdad, Iraq.

'Embedded' in Iraq: 5 views on who controls the news

As well as the war on the ground in Iraq, a battle is being fought in the media over access and information control. By JONATHAN DOW.

JON STEPHENSON

Jon Stephenson was the only New Zealand journalist based in Iraq while the New Zealand troops were stationed there.

He says the defence force had a policy of only allowing embedded journalists access to the Kiwi engineers in Iraq.

"The defence policy with regard to journalists visiting Basra is no different to the embedded programme of the British and Americans.

"My general impression was that the NZDF did their best to restrict and control journalists' access to the engineer contingent in Basra.

"Their whole mentality is fixed around controlling the media."

Stephenson says when he wanted to cover the New Zealand engineers' departure from Iraq, NZDF press officer Sandra McKie told him he should not visit the base because the engineers were too busy.

He says this surprised him as the engineers were confined to their base.

She also refused to tell him when the engineers were leaving Iraq for "security reasons".

Stephenson says on an earlier visit to Basra he attempted to interview the engineers.

He was told to leave the base because he was not an accredited journalist with the NZDF.

Jon Stephenson is a foreign correspondent for the *Sunday Star-Times*.

SANDRA MCKIE

Sandra McKie says the New Zealand Defence Force does not embed journalists — it facilitates them.

"Embedded means something completely different."

Facilitating them meant they stayed on the base at Basra, were provided with meals and transport, and were given access to personnel for interviews.

"They were responsible for getting themselves there; we didn't meet any of their costs and so on."

McKie says safety is the main reason NZDF facilitated visits to Basra.

"There's two aspects: the safety of the media concerned and making sure that our people, who had a job to do, could manage that and get on with the duties they had to do as well.

"You don't have extra people over there who can just be taken away from their duties."

McKie says Jon Stephenson or the *Sunday Star-Times* should have contacted NZDF before he went to Iraq.

"We dealt with New Zealand-based media and unbeknown to us he (Stephenson) was based in Baghdad."

Commander Sandra McKie is the press officer and deputy director of public relations for the New Zealand Defence Force.

NICKY HAGER

Nicky Hager says keeping things secret is essentially an abuse of power.

He cites an occasion where he arranged an interview with the head of the NZDF, Air Marshal Bruce Ferguson, on a serious matter.

Hager was told he would need to put the interview topic in writing.

"I did that and was told Ferguson was not available, not then, not ever, for an interview.

"There is full access for people doing stories that they approve of, or they have managed themselves," he says.

"But they completely will not co-operate or front when it is a story that puts them in a bad light."

Hager says NZDF staff are public servants who should provide information — not media management and PR.

"In a democratic society the information about what New Zealand forces do is the public's information."

Nicky Hager is an investigative journalist.

JIM TULLY

"The journalist should pursue an independent, authoritative version of what is actually happening.

That is inevitably incompatible with the agenda of the military.

Do journalists stand on their dignity and refuse to go as embedded or facilitated reporters, or do they take the pragmatic view that at least they can be there and bear witness to events acknowledging the restrictions placed upon them etc?

I would go despite the restrictions and control.

It is far from desirable, but in the best interests of the public.

Given the nature of modern warfare it is extremely difficult for reporters to act independently of the military without risking their liberty or lives.

I see no difference between the terms 'facilitated' and 'embedded'.

They are both indicative of news management to a greater or lesser degree."

Jim Tully is a media commentator and head of the School of Political Science and Communication at the University of Canterbury.

PAUL BUCHANAN

"The main purpose of embedded reporting is to limit and frame what reporters can see and hear, and thus send back in their stories.

The NZDF clearly got the script from the US, or at least decided of its own accord to copy it, in its decision to require reporters to be embedded.

The term aptly captures the relationship — they are in bed with the troops and thus less likely to want to send out something, or be capable of sending out something that causes offence or concern back home.

The reason for embedding is not concern for the reporter's security.

If the military was to start defining its mission to include ensuring the safety of compatriot reporters, it would complicate their jobs immensely — and maybe invite a horde of press rascals to attempt to come over for a look.

The quality of reporting on NZ troops has been pretty poor.

You got pictures of the troops doing the haka for the PM and talking about how much they want to help the people of Iraq.

This is PR stuff ginned up in Wellington rather than the hard reality on the ground in Basra."

Paul Buchanan is a senior lecturer in the Political Studies Department at the University of Auckland.