

E-Mail-Interview mit John Koopman

A. Would you please give a brief curriculum vitae?

Age = 45. I was 44 during the war.

I was born in Southern California and raised in a small town in Nebraska. I joined the Marines directly out of high school and served four years, from 1976 to 1980. I was honorably discharged at the rank of sergeant.

I graduated from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1984 with a bachelor of journalism degree, second major in Spanish literature.

I worked as a reporter for the Palm Beach Post in Florida for one year, and then spent four years as a reporter for the Omaha (Nebraska) World-Herald.

In 1990, I moved to California to work at a newspaper chain in the San Francisco suburban area, called the "Contra Costa Times." In 1995, I became an assignment editor for the paper.

In 1997, I was hired to be a supervising editor at the San Francisco Examiner. When the Examiner merged with the Chronicle, I stayed on, still as a supervising editor.

Two years ago, I returned to reporting and I am now a general assignment reporter for the San Francisco Chronicle.

I have covered police, politics, higher education and city government. I had no previous war reporting experience prior to Iraq, but I did a series of stories about the situation in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation in the late '80s.

B. Where and in which period of time were you appointed as a journalist / photographer during the Iraq war? Were you embedded?

I was an embedded reporter.

My newspaper designated me as the reporter who would cover U.S. military operations in the event of war last November.

I went to Kuwait on Feb. 16 and spent about a month reporting stories about military training and preparation.

On March 11, we embedded with our units. I was with the 3rd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment. This battalion was attached to a different regiment during the war. It was part of Regimental Combat Team 7, which is a part of the 1st Marine Division based in Camp Pendleton, California.

I stayed with the battalion from the beginning of the war through the fall of Baghdad and then left Iraq on April 19.

C. What does the term "embedded" mean to you personally? How would you define it?

To me, the term "embedded" simply means that you are a live-in guest of a particular military unit. You live with the unit, sleep where they sleep, eat what they eat and generally move with them as they go about their duties. You are not in the unit, nor do you have any particular duties or obligations to them. I say "guest" because I believe that an embedded reporter does have some basic responsibilities. It is your responsibility to abide by certain rules of the military unit. Like light discipline at night. Even though you might not agree that light discipline is necessary, you ought to abide by your host's rules and regulations. Other than that, as an embedded reporter, you have access to the officers and men (and women) of a unit and your job is to observe and report. Your job is not to be a cheer-leader, nr to assist the unit.

An embedded reporter is more of a “fly on the wall.” He or she should be unobtrusive and observant, and fair and accurate.

D. How was the moral atmosphere towards the Iraqis / the Allies in the country you reported from?

The moral atmosphere toward the Iraqis and other allies was, for the most part, neutral in the unit I was with. When I was a young Marine, shortly after the Vietnam war, people in the military had very derogatory names for Asians, Arabs, basically most Third-World nations. I didn't see that in Iraq. There was a name a lot of Americans used for Kuwaitis and Iraqis. It was Hajji. I'm not sure where the name came from. Could have referred to pilgrims, could have been Johnny Quest's young friend in the kid's show. But it wasn't said with the same venom as, say, “gook.” It was more of an all-encompassing word to describe anyone from that area. Apart from that word, I didn't really see any mistreatment or bad comments. A lot of guys expressed sympathy for the Iraqis, for having to fight the Americans. I never saw any mistreatment of prisoners, or anything I would consider immoral or unethical regarding them. But that was just my experience. And believe me, I was looking.

E. Who put you in charge with your reporting in Iraq?

I reported directly to the foreign/national editor of the San Francisco Chronicle, Andrew S. Ross.

F. Which medium did you use for your reporting?

I wrote for the San Francisco Chronicle newspaper, circulation about 550,000 daily, 570,000 Sunday. I also called into various radio stations and gave eyewitness accounts of movements and battles. Specifically, KFOG and KQED here in San Francisco, as well as an organization called Metro Networks, which feeds stories and audio clips to 1,200 radio stations nationwide.

G. Which steps did you take in order to get information which was important for you?

Just standard reporting. The commanding officer of the unit I was told his men to give me access and to answer my questions. I could move anywhere I wanted and ask questions of any Marine I wanted. That was while we were embedded. Before and after, it was different. You had to go through public affairs officers to set up interviews. You had to find interpreters to talk to Iraqis in Baghdad. But in general, the work was much the same as reporting in the United States. Just a few logistical issues to iron out.

I think each news organization works differently when it comes to story assignment and conceptualization. In my case, I came up with my own story ideas. Sometimes I would call my editors to explain what I was doing, and make sure they were OK with it. But mostly, I was on my own. Some stories were simply descriptions of a day's events. If the Marines fought a battle, I wrote about the battle. Many stories were simply stories of opportunity. I would be going along, and see something and think “there's my story.” Some days, I would imagine doing one story, and everything would turn around and I would write something completely different. Other times, I would write stories on a particular theme, if I noticed something. For example, I noticed that a lot of men appeared to be eager to fight, eager to engage the enemy. So I interviewed several of them and wrote a story about that. My stories

bounced back and forth between spot coverage of immediate events and topic-driven stories. I developed all of my story ideas once the war started. Before the war, I probably wrote one or two that were assigned by editors in San Francisco. The rest were mine.

H. How important is characteristics of medial influence concerning the recipient/reporter?

I think this varies from medium to medium and organization to organization. The media in Europe, I think, have a different influence with their various readers, listeners and viewers than the media in the United States. We will all disagree on which of those models is better. Certainly, in the United States, many of our newspapers have monopolies on their various circulation areas. So the characteristics of media influence are not so important. People take a newspaper because it's the only one around, and they want the sport scores. But certainly many readers respond to the influence a newspaper has, some positive and some negative, depending on whether they agree or not.

I. In your opinion, to which extent were you influenced in your reporting by others? Did you have the impression to be able to report in a free way?

In my opinion, I was not influenced at all. Influence can come in several ways. Some reporters are influenced by stories published in other newspapers, magazines or on TV. Especially if it is a competitive environment. My newspaper did not really compete with anyone regarding stories in Iraq. So, mostly, I was on my own. When I saw something worth reporting, I reported it. Occasionally, I would call my office and my editor would mention a story someone else had. But I was never asked to match the story. Usually, the conversation had more to do with information in the other story and whether it might be relevant to whatever I was doing. A reporter can also be influenced by the other reporters who are embedded in the same unit. I was worried this might be the case for me, but I was lucky to have two magazine journalists and a video producer. So I never wondered what my colleagues were producing, and whether I should be doing the same.

One can be influenced by the military, by the unit you are embedded with. This, too, was a big worry by many people before the war. I was fortunate, again, to be in a unit where that was not a problem. The commanding officer was honest and open with me. He never hid anything, nor tried to convince me to write things one way or another. I had full access and no censorship. I thought up my own stories and pursued them freely. But I would have done the same even if the officers and men had tried to influence me.

J. To which extent were receptive persons influenced by your reporting in your opinion?

I really have no idea. The San Francisco Chronicle has incredibly diverse readers. San Francisco has been the center of political and anti-war protest in the United States since the Vietnam War. And yet, the paper circulates throughout Northern California, in some very conservative communities. I got e-mails from people accusing me of being a war-monger and puppet of the Pentagon, as well as messages from people suggesting I was a member of the liberal media conspiracy for not writing more glowingly about U.S. troops.

I'm a very apolitical person. I don't write to promote or destroy anything or anyone. That's not my style. I'm more of a story-telling journalist. I simply see a thing and write about it as accurately as I can. I try to include as much context and relevance as I can. And I let readers

use that information for their own purposes. I believe you could read my stories and support an anti-war or pro-war stand.

K. Could you choose the manner and place of your reporting freely?

I chose the manner and place of my reporting within the confines of the embedding process in general. In other words, I was always at the mercy of the Third Battalion, in terms of time and place. When they were at Basra, I was at Basra. I could not ask someone to drive me from Basra to Umm Qasr in order to do a story there. My job was to stay with the unit and report on their activities. So there was no movement within the theater of battle. But within the unit, the Third Battalion, I could go anywhere and report on anything. Sometimes, I would walk to where I wanted to go, other times I would ask for a ride. But it was all at my instigation.

I was able to write stories at will, any time any place. I had a satellite phone and a laptop computer. So I could write a story in the middle of the desert and file it without relying on the military for assistance. And I had no restrictions on what to write or when to file my stories. Again, I don't think this was true of every embedded reporter. But it was for me.

L. How do you understand the term manipulation in general?

Manipulation is simply what happens when someone tries to get you to do something for them, or on their behalf, that you would not otherwise do if left to your own devices. I'm not sure I would make much of a distinction between manipulation and influencing, other than manipulation suggests something more premeditated, for nefarious purposes. Influencing is what everyone does, in order to get his or her way, and it can be done for beneficial purposes. I influence my son to do his homework every night by explaining how important it is, and rewarding him when he gets good grades. He might call that manipulation.

M. Did you feel manipulated during your reporting? Did you have the impression that some parts you were told or showed didn't correspond with the truth?

I never felt manipulated while I was embedded. Honestly, the Marines I was with were far too concerned with staying alive and performing their mission. I never once got the sense that the commanding officer looked at me and wondered how he could manipulate me into writing a certain kind of story, or putting a certain slant on it. He never read any of my stories until we got to Baghdad. Occasionally, a Marine would suggest I write about him, so his mother could clip the story at home. But this was mostly joking. Again, you have to remember I was with a Marine infantry battalion. The commanding officer was a lieutenant colonel. Possibly, reporters who dealt with generals and other high level commanders had a different experience. For me, it was just about tagging along and writing about what I saw.

N. To which extent do you think that receptives were manipulated by your reporting?

I really cannot say. I don't know. I think some people gained a better understanding of men in the military, and the horrors of war, from my reporting. Perhaps they became more sensitive to the harshness and difficulties of military life, and being in a war. At the same time, they no doubt took some of that information and became more aggressively against the war, because the realities became much clearer to them.

I would not say that anyone was manipulated by my reporting. I doubt that was the case. My stories were straightforward accounts of warfare and the men who fought. I had no agenda,

nor would I ever knowingly try to manipulate sources or readers. Which is not to say that it could not happen, even if inadvertently. But some reporters have a different mission. They are opinionated and opinion makers. I'm not one of them.

O. Which steps did you personally take in order to avoid a manipulation of your pieces of news?

I have said I was lucky to be in a good unit, where no one tried to influence my reporting. But in truth, some of the credit goes to me, because of my own experience. Last November, when the Pentagon first started talking about this new "embedding" program, I had an idea of how it would work out. I figured we reporters would be placed in units and allowed to report from there. It was to be much like the famous war correspondent Ernie Pyle did in World War II. But I had been around the military long enough to know that there are good, and conscientious officers, and bad ones. I didn't want to go to war with a bad one. Nor did I want to wait for the Pentagon to assign me to a battalion. So I went to the Marines looking for a good unit. I found Third Battalion Fourth Marines training in the desert, at 29 Palms, California. I met them, told them I was looking for a unit to go to war with, and I got to know them. One of the first things the commanding officer told me was, "I don't expect you to write good things about us all the time. If we mess something up, I know it's your job to write about it. I expect you to. Just be fair."

I knew then that I could trust him and that I wanted to be embedded in his unit. So I told the public affairs officers for the 1st Marine Division that I wanted to go with Three-Four. They thought that was fine, and said that if the Pentagon assigned the Chronicle a slot with the division, I would be embedded with Three-Four. And that's exactly how it happened.

P. Which role does, in your opinion, play the influence of media?

I really have no idea what role media influence has, or how much the media influence people or governments. I have read studies about this. And I have watched the effect of stories on companies, institutions and governments.

From this, I have only some very basic conclusions:

The media have much less influence than most people think. We can write stories and broadcast images and it doesn't seem to make much difference.

The media should have very little influence. That's not our job. We are not trained, nor do we have oversight, to have that kind of responsibility.

The best thing the media can do is report openly and honestly about the world, especially wars. Readers need to be informed, and then respond appropriately to every situation. But they should not be influenced BY our stories. They should only be made more aware.