

Both sides in the Iran/Iraq War allowed only brief, tightly controlled visits to the front. Foreign correspondents took considerable risks on trips from the Iranian side, which were designed to show the ferocity of battle. Iraq's conducted tours were offered in quiet periods so film could be taken of bloated corpses after battle. Either way, reporters were not allowed to wander far from supervision.

Another reason for the sporadic interest in these wars might be that there were no obvious "good guys" to cheer nor "bad guys" to revile. On television, sports and fictional dramas are contained and resolved within an hour or two, usually by virtue of heroes. Many viewers, even producers, conditioned to a clear choice of home team and good cop, may be ill-prepared for years of inconclusive war for who knows what objectives. The war between Iran and Iraq began with an invasion of Iranian territory launched by Saddam Hussein, already identified by Washington as a major-league villain. On the other hand, Iran was at the nadir of public favour in the United States, and the West generally, because of the episode in which fifty-two members of the US embassy staff in Teheran had been held hostage in their compound for 444 days. The Western mood was "a plague on both your houses." US policy was aimed at helping Iraq, but not so the public would notice. The press, in a preview of 1990/91, did little to probe this contradiction.

The contemporaneous war in a more remote country -- Afghanistan -- was far more thoroughly covered by both print and broadcast media. Here, from a Western viewpoint, was a perceived right and wrong. The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to prop up a puppet ruler, and the Mujahideen guerrillas fought for nine years until the Soviet army pulled out. (Afghans continued to fight among themselves, but the world lost interest.)

These questions were raised at the seminar, if not always answered. Jim Travers, who covered part of the Iran/Iraq war for Southam News, said he did not know why it was difficult to attract the interest of readers in a conflict that he saw as of major importance. Mark Starowicz, of the CBC, said that despite eight years of war and a million casualties, "it might have happened on another planet," so far as television was concerned. Others said it was because in TV news, if there are no pictures, there is no story.