

Article by Alberto Cairo

Edited by Eileen Mignoni

I Will Furnish the War

infographics in times of conflict

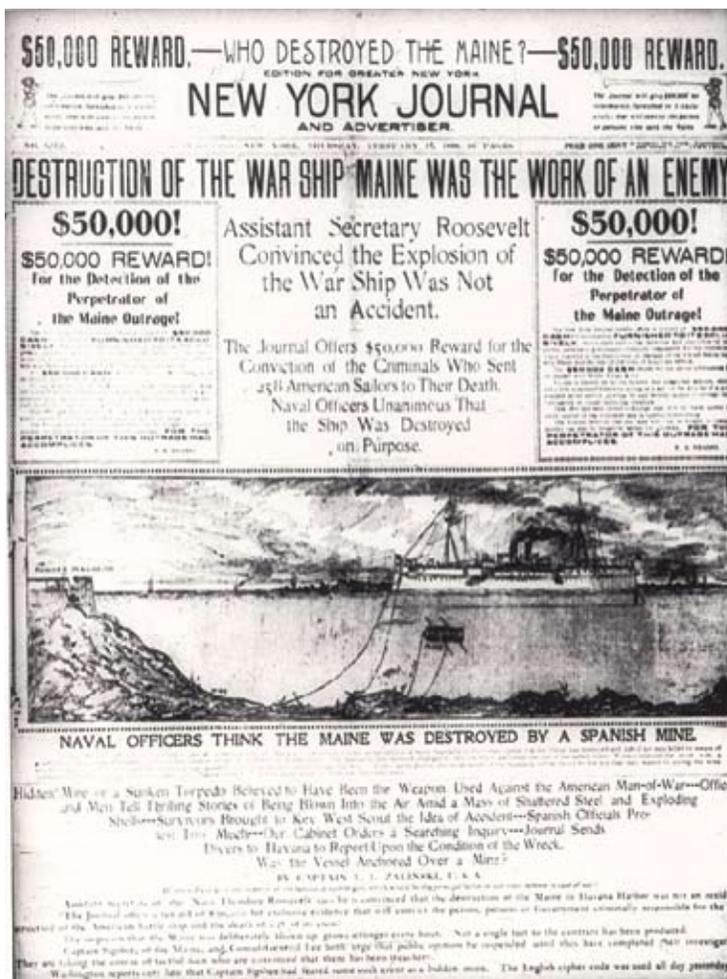


FIG 1: New York Journal - February 17, 1898.

On the night of February 15, 1898, the American battleship Maine sank after an explosion in the bay of Havana, Cuba, killing more than 250 people. The ship had been sent weeks before to watch for US interests in the area, which was suffering from riots for and against the Spanish colonial authorities. The cause of the explosion was not clear, and it remains unsolved to this day.

But there were people who thought the cause quite clear.

A FURNISHED WAR

William Randolph Hearst, the famous media mogul, was convinced that the tragedy of the Maine was the result of a conspiracy by Spanish soldiers (1). He was also engaged in a fierce fight with his main competitor, Joseph Pulitzer, for audience dominance. The infographic (FIG1) he published in the front page of its flagship, the New York Journal on February 17, is crystal clear: the picture shows with great detail the mine floating right under the ship's belly. Its caption reads: "The Spaniards, it is believed, arranged to have the Maine anchored over one of the Harbor mines. Wires connected the mine with a powder magazine and it is thought the explosion was caused by sending an electric current through the wire".

The headline was unequivocal: "Destruction of the war ship Maine was the work of an enemy". There was somebody to blame, and measures had to be taken. Hearst had been an advocate for a conflict with Spain, and he had no regrets in publishing rumors and lies, sometimes in the shape of extremely biased stories, sometimes as illustrations, to make his case.

The word "infographics" didn't exist at that time, although maps and simple diagrams, such as the one

discussed here, were regularly published. The hostilities between the US and Spain eventually broke out. They lasted for 100 days.

Hearst is famous for a cable interchange with the illustrator Frederick Remington. Remington, who was covering the Cuba revolution for Hearst, telegraphed him to say that the situation in the island was unexpectedly quiet, and that he didn't think that a major conflict was about to be unleashed. According to a well-known legend, Hearst responded: "Please remain. You furnish the pictures. I'll furnish the war" (2).

And a war was furnished, indeed.

A MISGUIDED WAR

On the morning of February 5, 2003, US Secretary of State Colin Powell addressed the United Nations Security Council on the US case against Iraq. He talked about the "evidences" the US secret services had gathered on the rebuilding of Iraq's stocks of weapons of mass destruction. He suggested links between Saddam Hussein's regime and Islamic terrorism. He asserted that the Iraqi dictator was seeking a nuclear weapon. Powell's speech was the climax of a well-orchestrated war drumming campaign that had began months before.

While he was making his case, a screen projected PowerPoint slides. Many of them contained graphs and maps, including 3D cutaways of the "mobile production facilities used (by Iraq) to make biological agents" (FIG2). These reconstructions were astonishingly detailed. They included call-outs that identified parts of the vehicles, such as the "fermentation" and the "active materials" tanks. How could anyone doubt that Powell's information was accurate, if he was able to show such beautiful diagrams? *Visual* evidence, one might think has to be preceded by *factual* evidence.

"My colleagues, every statement I make here today is backed up with sources, solid sources" Powell told the Security Council. Not so much. Later, it turned out that the sources were not solid at all. Most assertions regarding the WMD and Hussein's ties to Al Qaeda were plainly false (3). But they made their way to the media and to the public.

And a war was furnished, again.

A WAR FOR JOURNALISM

The impact of Powell's speech on public opinion was notable. It helped sweep the public mind towards a more favorable view of the invasion. More importantly, it was uncritically echoed by the media. Many newspapers published one or more of the slides without questioning their accuracy, not only in the US, but worldwide.

In other cases, the information Powell provided was used to create in-house infographics, such as the one in FIG 3, 'Iraq's ballistic missiles', published by El Mundo a few days after the speech. As you can see, in the last scene I programmed an interactive map that allowed the reader to move Iraq's launching vehicles to the four corners of the country to see how far Saddam's ballistic missiles could reach. We could call this "interactive" evidence.

I remember that at the end we decided not to include the Al Abbas missile (whose range was even bigger), present in Mr. Powell's slides, because our most cautious reporters pointed out that it was not clear the missile had ever been operational. Nonetheless the message was *evident*: according to our graphic, both Israel and Riyadh, capital of Saudi Arabia, were within range of Saddam's WMD. Other newspapers didn't restrain themselves whatsoever. After all, this information was based on "solid sources" - wasn't it?

Hearst's and Powell's infographics are hardly stand-alone examples of the misuse of information graphics in times of war, either with the purpose of pushing agendas, or guided by intentions. They are not important for that reason. They are relevant because they made their way to the media, and the evidence they showed, false as it was, tainted the public's mind and was repeated uncritically everywhere.



FIG 2: Slides from Mr. Powell's presentation

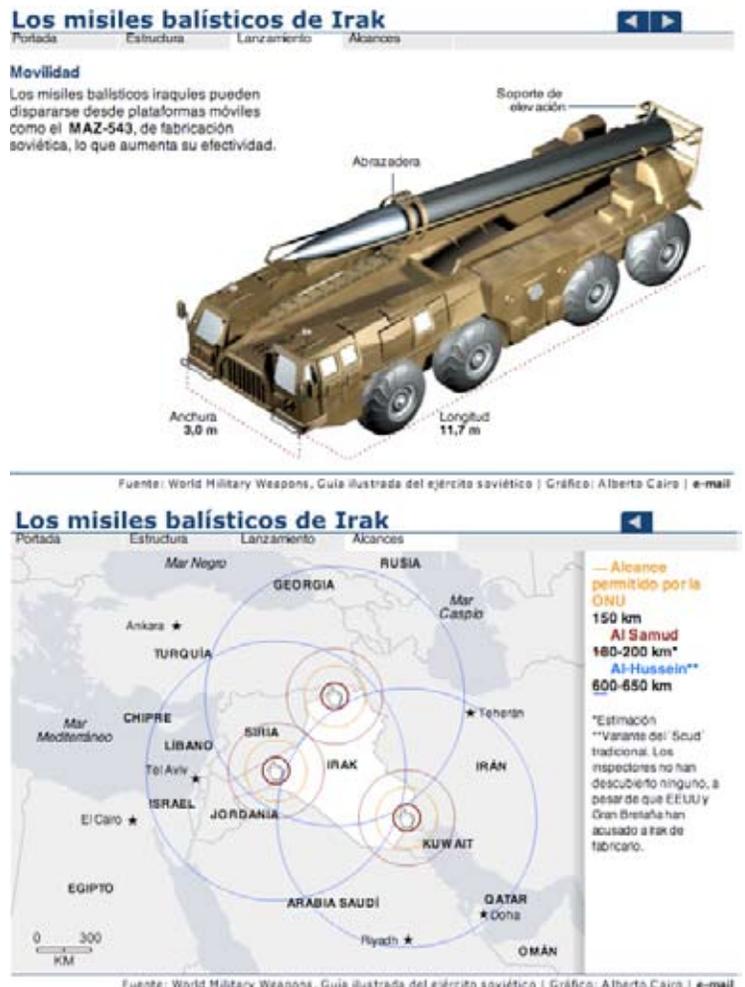


FIG 3: elmundo.es - <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2003/graficos/feb/s3/scud.html>

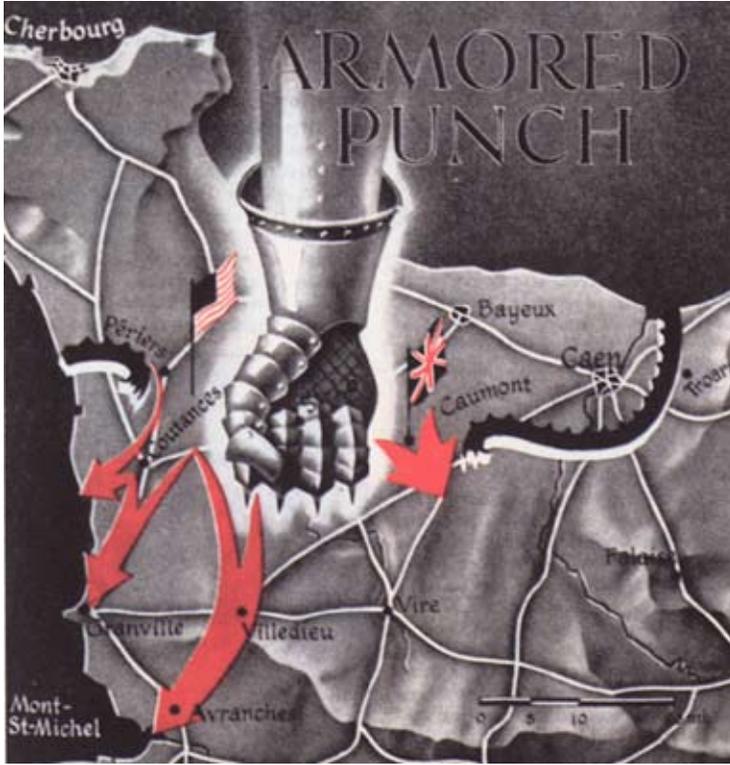


FIG 4: The work of Robert M. Chapin Jr., Chief Cartographer at Time magazine in the 1940s and the 1950s was visually striking, but journalistically (and cartographically, for that matter!) dubious

What we do as visual communicators has an impact on our audiences. Does this sound like a no-brainer? It does, indeed! But, if so, why do we keep making the same mistakes over and over? Why do we keep glorifying war using flashy illustrations on our daily maps? Why are we more worried about showing how the state-of-the-art engines of destruction work, instead of explaining what their effects on the population are?

Part of the problem is what I call the “original sin” of infographics in news publications. Since newspapers started using visual explanations, and in spite of a handful of exceptions, they were not conceived of as tools for *enhancing the understanding of information*. Rather, they were thought of as a *derivation* of illustrations, designed and executed by illustrators, not by reporters with art skills. In many cases, their goal was not to inform, but to entertain, shock, and awe.

The way war information graphics are produced in many newspapers today originated during World War II (FIG 4). It developed fully with the coverage of the Falklands war, in 1982 (FIG 5), and then, was “perfected” during the first Gulf War of 1991.

In the 1991 war, the popularization of user-friendly computer software packages, and the desire to compete with the TV, (particularly with the emergent 24-hours news networks, such as CNN), encouraged graphics styles loaded with huge 3D arrows, gratuitous special effects, and colorful maps often partially hidden behind ultra-detailed renderings of bombers and fighters. The lack of good photographs from the frontline in a time when the prevalence of images was considered key to the competition for a dwindling readership strengthened this approach to information graphics.

Today, there are signs that the tide is changing, but we’re still too far from where we should be.

A WAR FOR RESPONSIBILITY

Let me be honest about my reasons for this article: I’ve made tons of mistakes with infographics when covering conflicts, and I want to talk about them candidly. My own peccadilloes have led me to think that there’s something deeply wrong with the way many news publications deal with war. War graphics today are more technically elaborate and sophisticated than the ones during the 1991 Gulf War and, of course, during the conflict at the Falklands but, journalistically, *they are exactly the same*. Their main goal doesn’t seem to be to be useful, but to have an *impact* (FIG 6 and FIG 7).

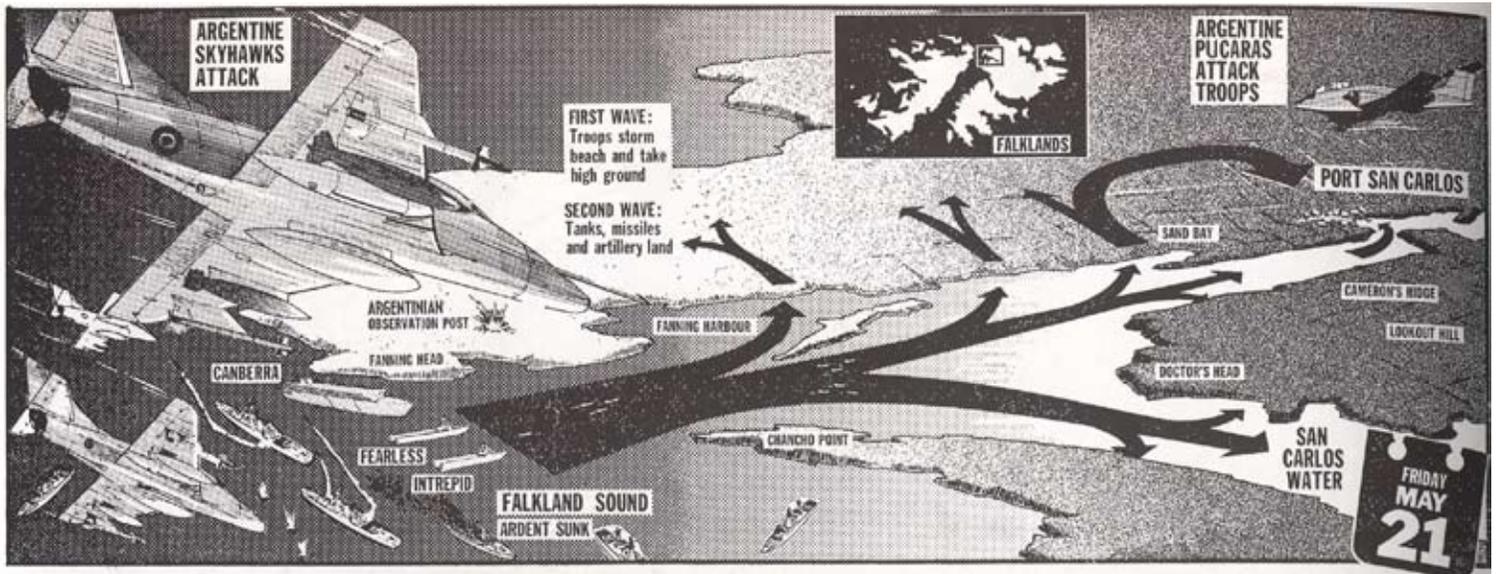


FIG 5: The Sunday London Times, 1982



FIG 8: El Mundo

FIG 8: El Mundo - <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2003/graficos/abr/s2/supercobra.html>

striking stories, and delivering them using sophisticated software, rather than making sure they get the story *right*.

It's true that in these kind of situations it is hard to find non-biased sources to double-check the facts, but still. I hear reporters all the time doubting the reliability of information provided by the military so, why don't we do something? To get started: instead of designing a bombastically illustrated diagram, use a locator map, as sophisticated and detailed as you wish, but *just* a map.

2. Keep reminding yourself that war is not a game

War is not a movie, either. Infographics should not *dramatize* reality, but *represent* it. It's not our goal to strengthen the tragic nature of the story, because war is tragic by itself. When presenting war stories, tone the style down, don't over-illustrate. Avoid 3D arrows and forced perspectives. A simple, planar map is always better than an isometric rendering of the battle scene, with little cartoony explosions and Apache helicopters gunning people down. War graphics should be approached the same way as reconstructions of terrorist attacks, accidents, and natural catastrophes: in an aseptic manner, with a deep respect for the victims and the soldiers involved.

Don't let weaponry fascinate you. Weapons are sexy, shiny (at least in the promotional videos of the companies that produce them), and, moreover, they look *very cool* when done in 3D, and explained in video-game-like animations.

Weapons have always appealed to infographics artists for these reasons. After all, many of us have a solid background as video-game, comic-book, and action-movie consumers. When I was the online graphics director at *El Mundo* we produced nearly **60** animated diagrams on the war in Iraq between February and April 2003 (plus innumerable static maps and charts). Of those, **7** were about the field operations and **35 about weapons**; **3** dealt with the economic consequences of the war. Only **1** was about refugees and civilians (8). You get the picture. Did we have the right priorities? If I had to cover the war in Iraq today, I assure you, I would have done it very differently.

Am I saying that we should give up making graphics on war technology? Of course not. But we must be honest about what the relevant information is, and what the reader cares about. Who wants to know how a Supercobra helicopter works, anyway (FIG 8)? What percentage of your readers would find that information relevant? Some of them would surely stop and take a quick look at the gorgeous 3D model, and then flip the page to read the next headline, *unless* the explanation of the helicopter is somehow justified by an important news story. If that's not the case, you had better spend your time on something worthwhile. This leads me to my next suggestion.

3. Think about the different angles war can be approached

War is much more than military operations, battles and city raids. War is about shattered families, destroyed communities, refugee camps, suffering and grief. And, sometimes, it's also about hope. We should focus more on all those elements and less on the troop movements. Think about the big picture.

Keep in mind what *The New York Times* did after the invasion of Iraq, or during the recent conflict in Lebanon. In both cases, the paper sent an information graphics reporter, Archie Tse, to look for stories that could be told using graphics. Of course, not every newspaper can afford to fly a graphics person to a dangerous area, but there are lessons to be learned from those experiences.

See just one of the graphics that Tse produced for the war in Lebanon coverage: 'Riding in a Convoy to Southern Lebanon' (FIG 9). The presentation is a neat combination of cartography and multimedia elements: short videos illustrate each step of the trip from Beirut to Merj 'Uyun. A secondary

navigation gives access to each one of those videos and to a simple vector diagram on the composition of the convoy.

This is a story that was not found anywhere else, at least in this form, as a well built multimedia package. It's original, it's engaging and it's *relevant* because it talks about the *human* side of the conflict, its impact on civilians. It's true that *The New York Times* publishes too many of your average war graphics (FIG 10), but in most cases they are restrained and focused (9).

Moreover, this kind of story *makes a difference*. Making a difference in today's increasingly competitive newspaper market can keep your reader paying for your content. Anybody can publish wire news based on dubious information by official sources, but only a handful of publishers still think that producing original stories is the best strategy. I agree with the latter. As professor Philip Meyer (10) joked once, if you have a restaurant in crisis, you don't start offering a menu of *lesser* quality. It's bizarre that this is frequently the approach of news organizations, whose only strategy to keep readers seems to be to worsen the product by laying off many of their best professionals.

Jokes aside, the reasons why we should think more about how we produce graphics on war is not economics, but ethics and professionalism. After all, the bottom line of this article is quite simple: the war for good infographics is, first of all, a war for good journalism.

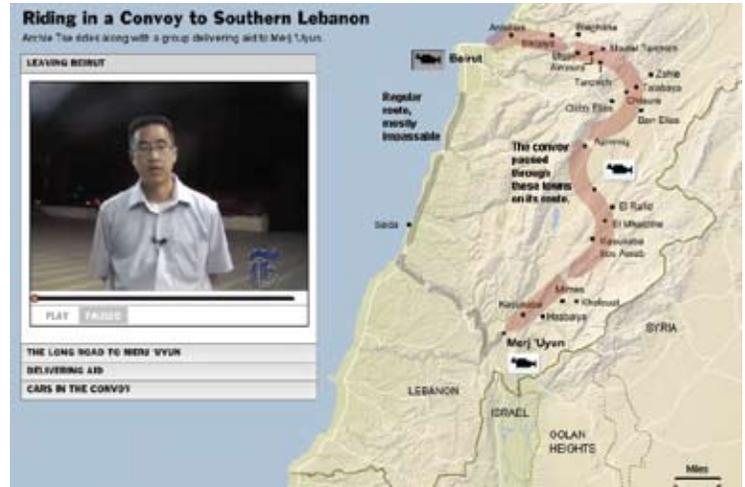


FIG 9 - The New York Times



FIG 10 - The New York Times

NOTES

(1) Some inquiries conducted years after the sinking concluded that the explosion was caused by an internal fire that affected the powder in the ship. Others said that the explosion was the result of hitting a floating mine. Regardless, what it is not known to this day is if, as Hearst assumed, the mine had been set up by “Spanish agents”.

(2) According to Nasaw (2001), it is not clear that Hearst was talking about a conflict between the US and Spain or about the hostilities between the Spanish occupying forces and the Cuban rebels. The telegrams that Hearst and Remington interchanged were never found. Nasaw says that the claim that Heart's actions were the main cause of the war is an overstatement. In his opinion, the war was inevitable, whether with or without Hearst noisy interventions.

(3) Most information about the mobile WMD facilities was provided by just one source, codenamed “Curveball”, held by German intelligence. The reliability of Curveball had been questioned numerous times before Powell's speech. See Isikoff and Corn (2006, p.182-190), Ricks (2006, p. 90-92), and Rich (2006, p. 68-70). The other major source was a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) from 2002. The Bush administration's pre-war accusations against Iraq were analyzed by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, in a review released in July, 2004. It concluded: “Most of the major key judgments in the Intelligence Community's October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), Iraq's Continuing Programs for Weapons of Mass Destruction, either overstated, or were not supported by, the underlying intelligence reporting”.

(5) Report by The Program on International Policy, at the University of Maryland, October 2003, page 13
http://65.109.167.118/pipa/pdf/oct03/IraqMedia_Oct03_rpt.pdf

(6) See my article ‘What Should You Show in a Graphic?’ in the Summer 2006 issue of *Design* magazine. It can be downloaded from my website:
<http://www.albertocairo.com/imagenes/articlesndsummer.pdf>

(7) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Iraq/Story/0,2763,956255,00.html>

(8) <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2003/graficos/feb/s4/indexirak/index.html>

(9) An exception has to be made: the many meaningless pieces on weaponry and aircraft during the war in Iraq.

(10) Meyer is the author of the hugely relevant *The Vanishing Newspaper* (2006), University of Missouri Press. Meyer is a professor at the School of Journalism - University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I didn't take the quote from the book.

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