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The Media and the Military: A Marriage of Convenience

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Military and the Media

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IMPORTANCE OF MEDIA

The media has influenced the conduct of military operations for centuries, but the nature of modern society has massively increased the impact of the media. It is fair to say that today it is also still growing and should now be regarded as fundamental to success in war or peace support operations – and also in the particular Macedonian context, internal counter-insurgency operations.

Many aspects of the media's impact have to be assessed. They range from the fundamental obligations that democratic societies have to inform their publics through the media, to the use of the media by opponents as a weapon. In immoral hands the media can be a prime weapon of what is known as asymmetric warfare, where authoritarian and non-democratic groups use deliberate campaigns of disinformation and lies to try to undermine opponents.

Liberal and democratic societies are particularly vulnerable to such media campaigns because opponents exploit their openness and freedom of information to spread their propaganda. In times of crisis, such as the situation in Macedonia in 2001, publics are vulnerable to rumours, exaggerations or lies designed to create alarm or whip up emotions. The media do not have guns, but what they write can create or worsen conflicts. This means there is an obligation on both military and the media to behave properly and present facts and opinions in a calm, clear and responsible way.

MODERN WARS

At the same time as the media has become more important, the actual job of reporting is getting more difficult for both journalists and military spokesmen. There are many reasons...

- For much of this century wars, for instance the First and Second World Wars, were for national survival. This made reporting them relatively simple, because the issues could be presented in black and white. Modern conflict is much more complicated. It is rarely the case nowadays that the issues are so absolute. This makes the job of both reporters and spokesmen far harder because they have to describe complex issues where what is happening and what is the right course of action is rarely obvious, and often controversial.
- In the past conflicts were between states, but now they are very often within states, which makes their reporting even tougher and more complex. Civil conflict produces violent disagreements within societies, and outsiders find it confusing to work out what is happening, while insiders understandably find it harder to remain fair and objective when the very fabric of their own society is under stress from within.
- Conflicts on behalf of democracies are subject to the ebbs and flows of public opinion, which means strategies and war aims can change rapidly according to circumstance, often itself influenced and exaggerated by what the media is saying.

- This problem is amplified when democratic coalitions are fighting together, because each nation has somewhat different aims, with varying levels of commitment, which change over time as well. Coordinating a common view is vital to avoid an appearance of disunity, but harmonising different views is not only difficult but can produce slow response times. This further inhibits effective media handling, which is most effective when the message is simple and quick.
- Nowadays we have conditional, very restricted conflicts, not total war. Limited conflicts means limited aims and outcomes, which fall well short of total victory, so instead of a black and white picture of a winner or a loser, the picture is more grey. In some circumstances who won itself becomes a matter of debate. In the 1991 Gulf War the clear military victory of the allied coalition against Iraq's forces nevertheless produced an outcome that left Saddam in power. This has been portrayed by some as an incomplete victory. In Macedonia's case the Ohrid agreement was a victory for all sides because it ended the conflict at an early stage, and produced a political deal to reconcile all ethnic groups. However such a complex outcome could not be portrayed in traditional conflict terms of one winner and one loser. This is a challenge for both spokesmen and journalists.
- In total war for total victory or national survival, then virtually any weapon and tactic can be justified. However, as indicated above, modern conflicts are more limited, and increasingly extreme methods or the use of indiscriminate weapons cannot be easily justified. This means that methods of fighting, and the use of particular weapons will themselves become controversial and come under a media microscope e.g. NATO's use of Cluster bombs, and Depleted Uranium cannons. In the case of Macedonia the use of heavy artillery against villages, and fighter-bombers was controversial. The use of artillery was seen by some as indiscriminate and acted to further polarise public opinion and therefore worsen the conflict. It is a simple example of how the media and public opinion need to be taken account of in every phase of military planning and execution.
- It should be mentioned that, although this is not strictly relevant to a discussion on the media, developments in international law prohibit the use of weapons in an indiscriminate manner, and legal advisers are an absolute necessity in any form of conflict.
- Societal change has produced massive changes in the attitudes to war. In western nations there is an increasing antipathy to war, which is increasingly hard to justify to public opinion in any except extreme circumstances. This is allied to an aversion of the kind of casualties that were accepted in previous conflicts e.g. World War One and Two. In some cases this aversion to casualties can even apply to the enemy's, as well as criticism of so-called collateral damage. The widespread lack of recent experience of war makes most of the public ignorant about realities of conflict.
- In the Balkans this western attitude has to be modified. The bitterness created by civil wars, allied to stronger memories of previous conflicts, means there is usually little sympathy for those portrayed as the 'enemy', which can even extend to civilians. However there can be a similar lack of realism about the casualties. In both Macedonia's crisis, and recent Western conflicts, casualties that, in historical

terms, would be described very small were portrayed as very high. In some western nations this increased anti-war attitudes e.g. the 1991 Gulf War, but in Macedonia what were low casualties were portrayed by some in sensationalist terms to try to whip up a kind of war fever. Of course one death is too many, and all deaths are a personal tragedy, but the media portrayal of casualties is something we have to be aware of, especially if exploited for political purposes.

- Modern technology has accelerated the flow of information to an extraordinary degree, while through miniaturisation, it is making reporters ever more mobile. At the most advanced level we are already seeing live video interviews broadcast from the frontline using equipment no larger than a moderate sized suitcase. As technology continues to advance live video and instant transmission of combat will soon be possible. This puts extraordinary pressure on the military, because the time to react or check facts will be very small. It also adds to the military's security problems, with instant reporting of ongoing operations.

THE MEDIA

The military often have little experience or knowledge of the media. It is important that the media are understood. No soldier would be considered competent if he did not have thorough knowledge of his equipment, and given the powerful impact of the media on the conduct of operations, any ambitious soldier should consider it important to have some knowledge of the media. Understanding the media also involves understanding not just their strengths and weaknesses, but also the problems they have to overcome to do their job. Helping the media with their problems creates a good mutual working atmosphere, that encourages fair coverage.

- The media in general has very little defence expertise, and so are liable to make mistakes through ignorance. Responsible journalists have an obligation to educate themselves. However, the military must also help them do so, both through education in times of peace, and during crises, by properly explaining what is happening.
- The media are also incredibly variable, as with all professions, in their competence, knowledge and bias. Where a conflict has an international aspect, you must take into account different cultures, as well as loyalties. Press officers must therefore be careful about treating journalists as if they are all the same.
- Journalists have very little space or time to explain stories. In the BBC a typical TV news story can be as short as 300 words. Even many newspaper stories can average about 700 words. This is a major professional challenge, to take an often complex issue, present differing views fairly, and in a few words put it in terms the public will understand and be interested by. In Macedonia stories are in general much longer, but still require heavy summarising of major issues, and if they follow western trends their stories will get shorter. This challenge to explain a lot in a little space has many effects...

- In such a short space complex issues can be over-simplified, with issues turned into black and white, rather than the shades of grey that we mostly find in the real world.
- There is a tendency for journalists to explain complex events by generalising from the particular; e.g. using isolated examples to symbolise whole story. This would mean, for instance, the plight of a large number of refugees would be illustrated by looking at one person. TV is particularly prone to this, and the result can be simplistic or mislead because one person's story may not be typical of everyone else's.
- Journalists will tend to focus on the emotional side of events. This is because viewers and readers want to be entertained as well as informed. Experience has shown journalists that they will often be more successful if they make their appeal to the heart not the mind. The power of pictures also tends to emphasise their emotional impact, and giving complex explanations on television is particularly hard. The end result can be a description of an event, but with no explanation or analysis.
- Journalists understandably want to produce dramatic stories that will grab the attention and make big headlines. They are not only competing with other media for readers or viewers, but also competing for the most space and biggest headlines with other journalists on their own newspaper radio and TV. This can give them a temptation to be sensationalise or exaggerate.
- The western media are often suspicious of the Government/military, which can mean starting with a credibility gap. Sometimes this is a product of a culture which means journalists see themselves as anti-establishment, but sometimes it is a result of experience. In the former communist world and amongst emerging democracies journalists have been used to being fed a diet of official information that has been little more than propaganda. Such countries have a serious credibility problem to overcome.
- It is not often admitted publicly, but privately journalists will acknowledge that bad news gets more prominence. This is part of a pervasive media culture that bad news gets bigger headlines, and so the journalists adapt and write their stories in a way that meets what they believe their editors want. This is not the place for a complex debate about news values, but the bias towards bad news can produce a misleading overall picture by not reporting or giving enough attention to good news.
- The modern media works extremely fast. Speed is all, especially on television and other broadcast media, where the first person on air is seen by his competitors as the 'winner'. This produces a variety of effects...
- Journalists are under such intense pressure to work fast that it is hard for them to find enough time to double-check or get the full story. This can produce a temptation to guess or speculate, or simply take a chance.
- The speed of the media also means the story moves on rapidly. This means that journalists are always looking for something new, and also have little time to correct mistakes. It means that if there is an

early mistake, or a misleading impression is given, it can be very hard to correct. Journalists have little time to look over their shoulder, but are always preparing the next story.

- In open societies journalists are also intensely competitive. In communist and authoritarian societies the media, because it was closely controlled, tended to produce personalities more akin to civil servants, because there was no genuine competition or opportunity to find stories. However as the effect of authoritarian rule wears off old-style journalists either adapt to the new methods or are dispensed with.
- The media is attracted by conflict, so in crises the number of journalists reporting a story can be very large. Press officers have to be prepared to cope with the fact that journalists will be everywhere. In open societies it is also increasingly impossible to prevent journalists having access to virtually everywhere. Not only is there an increasing expectation by journalist and the public that they should have access, but new and ever-smaller information technology makes the media an independent operator, regardless of what the military wish.
- In modern society the media attracts very high quality people. It has a combination of glamour, fame, and usually good pay that means there is no shortage of recruits. In countries like Britain journalism is one of the most popular professions for graduates. This means that in general journalists are quick thinking, clever and competent. Journalists did not have the same status in the old authoritarian societies, but as they develop the status of journalists often rises. Furthermore many young people are attracted to the relative independence that being a journalist can bring.

The MEDIA in MACEDONIA

- The material above has a general applicability to the media in democratic society, but of course each country has particular features, and Macedonia is no exception. In 2001 and 2 the media's role in the crisis and its aftermath was considerable. The hardline media fanned the flames of ethnic hatred and contributed to whipping up a war fever. In 2001 a European Commission report concluded, "Media coverage during the 2001 crisis significantly contributed to worsening the political situation."
- Conversely some individual journalists behaved with considerable independence to report fairly, and the large amount of responsible coverage of the 2002 elections and the run-up contributed to its peaceful outcome.
- Although the media was largely independently owned, the owners of many of these outlets held hardline views, and the journalists were expected to write to this hardline agenda. Rumours and lies were sadly quite common. There was a considerable gulf between what was said by ethnic Albanian and Macedonian outlets, reflecting how much of the journalism exacerbated the ethnic divide through biased journalism. Poor training, lack of experience and the difficulty of being objective when their country was in crisis meant many journalists routinely mixed up fact, rumour and comment. In this way

the public was ill-served, in not being able to form a clear view of what was happening, in order to make up their own mind.

- Nevertheless there were many individual journalists of ability who tried, in difficult circumstances, to do their job fairly and objectively. Whatever the problems, there was a core of journalists who consistently were able to find out what was happening and did their best to report it. In this context it is worth repeating the conclusion to a piece I wrote for NATO review last autumn....”Last year the media in FYROM were seen as a significant factor in their country’s slide towards civil war, but in the successful elections that have just been held, while some still opted for bias and lies, large portions of that same media played a truly constructive role. This was sometimes despite threats and intimidation, but many brave individuals were determined to be part of the solution, not part of the problem. It is particularly noteworthy that some of those who were threatened came to NATO for help, and we spoke loudly on their behalf. We have indeed come a long way.”

The RESPONSE to the MEDIA

Regarding the above, it is also worth making the point that one of the key reasons that the media could not give the public the service it deserved was because of the difficulty journalists had in getting reliable information from the government. The Macedonian government broke a number of the practical rules of media handling, some of which will be covered below.

- Working with the media is not just necessary for success during conflict or crisis, but also a democratic obligation. Governments have an obligation to supply the media with accurate information. But even then free societies cannot function properly where government has a monopoly on information. A free media is a source of alternative views, different sources of information and also a check on the activities of government. This is never more important than during a conflict, when a society is making life and death decisions. So press officers must recognise their obligations to deal with the media. They are part of the functioning of open society and have the right to be there.
- It follows from the above that the military must take the media very seriously and apply the appropriate amount of resources. Properly informed the media can possibly help achieve success in a crisis, and if badly handled can certainly lead to defeat. Recent examples of the power of the media include NATO’s Kosovo campaign, where media reporting of NATO bombs that missed their target reduced public support for the air attacks. Before that, in Somalia, TV coverage of the bodies of US troops being dragged through the streets is widely believed to have played a primary role in getting the US to withdraw its forces. In Macedonia during the crisis news reporting of various events, for example ambushes on Macedonian troops or refugee flows, added to pressure on the government to intensify military action. Ignoring the media is not an option.
- A key feature is to move fast. As indicated above the media place huge value on being first with the news. It is also a fact that the tone of coverage is set early, so if you do not respond quickly your

opportunity to decisively influence the media will be lost. A statement early on will have more effect than ten later on. It also has to be remembered that the pressure on the media is so intense that they will broadcast whether you speak or not, and will seek other peoples' views.

- The practical consequences of the need to respond quickly are considerable. Any military press operation must work to tight deadlines. This will require access to information technology and other resources, both to be able to get information quickly and to distribute it. It is vital that bureaucratic timelines, which tend to be slow, must not get in way. You must work to media deadlines, or you will not get message out in a timely fashion.
- Dealing with the media is a command function first and foremost. This means that senior commanders recognise their need to deal with the media and to create a media strategy as part of their job. If losing the media could mean losing the war, as it could, then it is obvious that generals and ministers must take a close interest. Commanders also need to integrate media policy with overall policy and strategy at an early stage. I hope I have demonstrated that public opinion and the media can critically affect operations, so their potential impact needs to be taken into account early in any planning.
- As mentioned earlier, the media produces high quality people, so to deal with journalists you also need quality people. Dealing with the media is not a natural part of military training, so there is a need for appropriate training and ensuring there are sufficient numbers. When a crisis occurs the media 'frenzy' is often intense if short-lived, so you must be able to cope with surges of media activity. Again this is a question of resources, and officers must see a spell as a military spokesman as good for their career.
- Civil control of the military also applies to media handling. It is fatal to have a division between the civilian and military structures. They have different areas of expertise, but they should be seen as a team, and ultimately the chain of command must lead to the Minister of Defence. Modern conflict is also highly political, and the public takes a strong interest in operations. There must also be good co-operation and harmonisation between different departments. The differing information coming out of the Ministries of Defence and Interior during the crisis of 2001 was extremely damaging to the whole government. The particular causes of the problem have now been solved, but the lesson must not be forgotten.
- Media handling requires a high degree of flexibility, which is a challenge for many armies. If something happens, finding information, and responding to the media, must not get delayed by traditional chain of command, as a sergeant reports to a lieutenant, who reports to a captain, and so on. The need for speed requires much greater flexibility.
- This also means you need to devolve media handling. In practise it simply takes too long for the senior commanders or politicians to approve everything that is said to the media. Press officers need to work to clear guidelines, and then speak to the media using those guidelines. This is difficult, but has to be done if you wish to operate with enough speed. All soldiers also need to know how to respond to the

media. This is not saying that every soldier should say what they like, but contact with media is inevitable, so soldiers need basic information on how to react.

- You should always listen to the media, and adapt. Journalists often find useful information, and in any event you need to respond to their agenda. If they are focussing on a particular event you must be able to respond to it. It is perfectly fair to lay out your agenda at press conferences, but remember they have the last word through their reports in the papers, radio or TV.
- The media are very variable, so treat them individually. Journalists who show particular interest should be encouraged, and during times of peace opportunities should be taken to educate them in military affairs. Dealing with journalists in less stressful times also creates a good relationship and mutual trust, which will be valuable during crises. In practise dealing with the media is a very individual matter, and different media need to be handled in different ways with radio, TV and newspapers all having different requirements.
- However more important than anything else is credibility. Credibility is everything. During the crisis the best journalists found the reliable sources and reported fairly and accurately. But even they found great difficulty getting reliable information, and often faced flatly contradictory information from different ministries. In the end many did not know who to believe, and so tended to believe no one. Credibility is influence. This also means, never lie. On key occasions it can be tempting, but the long-term damage is high because trust is hard to get, easy to lose, and once lost almost impossible to rebuild. Part of achieving credibility is to do that hardest of all things - admit bad news. Experience shows that it usually comes out in the end anyway, and when it does the perceived attempt to hide it damages credibility even more. Conversely to admit bad news gains credibility, which makes people more willing to believe and report good news.
- In the context of the issue of credibility, I will repeat what I said in the NATO Review on this issue....”But the most important requirement for success was simple, though not easy – credibility. At the heart of our problems last summer was the fact ethnic Macedonians did not believe us. We knew we were speaking the truth, but we had to persuade the media of that. The forceful refutation of others’ lies and disinformation had to be followed by building up a record of accuracy in our information, as well as gaining acceptance that our strategy was at least honest and sincere, even if some still disagreed with it. The success of Task Force Harvest helped provide this credibility. We said the weapons would be collected, and they were; we said the NLA would disband, and it did; we said Macedonian paramilitary units were causing violence, and when they were withdrawn the incidents ceased. And after the press conferences were over we talked individually with the journalists, arguing and briefing over coffee, comparing notes. The problem the journalists had was that it was hard to know what to believe, because for months they had been fed a diet of distortion and conflicting views. Despite this, and despite the bias of the organisations they worked for, many wanted to get it right. Others were already well informed, but were not allowed to write what they knew. In such circumstances personal

relationships were vital, learning to trust each other as individuals, even as friends. NATO's media strategy helped open up the media, and the success on the ground, actively promoted and explained, built up NATO's credibility. By the end of Task Force Harvest in October 2001 a core group of journalists basically trusted NATO, and regarded our version of events as most reliable."

CONCLUSION

- My experience of being both a spokesman and a journalist points very clearly to one conclusion – we must work with each other. Recent history makes clear that the media is a key factor in conflict, so working with journalists is not an option. The public also want independent scrutiny of government from media and democracy requires. At the same time a good spokesman and a good journalist have some key things in common – most of all, both succeed through credibility. By fair and honest dealing we can help each other, and the public is the main beneficiary.
