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The Media and the Military

– Belgrade briefing

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Security Sector Reform and the Media

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IMPORTANCE OF MEDIA – In the information age the media is becoming ever more important.

The nature of modern society has massively increased the impact of the media. It should now be regarded as fundamental to success in war or peace support 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.

Democratic societies are particularly vulnerable to such media campaigns because opponents exploit freedom of information to spread propaganda. In times of crisis publics are vulnerable to rumours, exaggerations or lies designed to create alarm or whip up emotions. There is an obligation on both military and the media to present facts and opinions in a calm, clear and responsible way.

These obligations are particularly vital in areas such as the Balkans where recent memories, allied to historical differences leave a residue of bitterness and hostility, which is easy for the unscrupulous to exploit. In societies where corruption is common, democracy is fragile and distrust of officialdom is high, then an independent media is highly influential.

MODERN WARS – for the military and government justifying and explaining conflicts is getting harder

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.

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Modern conflicts and peace support operations are not just hard to explain but their outcome is often indecisive. Success is incremental, and requires sustained effort over a long period – there are rarely quick results. The fact there is no total war any more means there can be no total victory, which can be hard to explain to the public, whose support is vital, and also to an impatient media who want clear, quick outcomes.

When fighting a limited conflict the tactics used, and even the weapons, can become controversial, and therefore a matter of media debate. Cluster bombs, Depleted Uranium shells, the heights aircraft fly at, all become matters of media debate. For the military the influence on how they conduct operations is growing

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. 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'. This can even extend to civilians. The highly partisan views of much of the media not only gives an inaccurate view of the events on the ground, but also present a black and white view of civil conflicts which are highly complex. This makes the search for a compromise peace particularly difficult.

Modern technology has accelerated the flow of information to an extraordinary degree, while through miniaturisation, it is making reporters ever more mobile. As recently seen in Iraq we are already seeing live video interviews and pictures of actual combat broadcast from the frontline. 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 MILITARY in PEACETIME – people want to spend money on teachers and doctors not soldiers, but defence on the cheap can lead to disaster, so finding the right balance needs a sophisticated and rational debate

There is always a danger of defence becoming a political football. On one hand the expense of defence always makes it vulnerable to attack on grounds of cost, but equally hardliners can block essential reforms and necessary cutbacks by claiming the nation's defences are under threat.

Restructuring of traditional defence forces involves high political cost, with base closures, redundancies, scrapping apparently usable equipment, and a requirement for new spending. It

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often involves drastic reductions in military jobs at a time of high unemployment. This is unpopular and hard to explain.

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. 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.

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, and 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.

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 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. This can give them a temptation to sensationalise or exaggerate.

The western media are often suspicious of the Government/military. 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.

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The modern media works extremely fast. Speed is all, especially on television and other broadcast media, where his competitors see the first person on air 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.

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 adapts to the new methods or is 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.

In modern society the media attracts very high quality people. 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 RESPONSE to the MEDIA – like them or hate them, the media are a fact of life, and part of what makes democratic societies work

Throughout the various Balkan conflicts the governments of the region lacked any real commitment to fair and objective release of information. Outside media organisations rarely trusted any information they received, and consistently found it to be unreliable. In part this can be explained as the product of a recent communist and authoritarian past. Added to that were the passions of bitter civil conflict. Now that is history, and democratic systems are in place, attitudes to media handling within the military need to change rapidly in line with developments in society.

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

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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.

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.

The practical consequences of the need to respond quickly are considerable. Any military press operation must work to tight deadlines. It is vital that bureaucratic timelines and military hierarchies, 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. Commanders also need to integrate media policy with overall policy and strategy at an early stage.

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.

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.

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.

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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 various Balkan crises 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 whom 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 and easy to lose. Part of achieving credibility is to do that hardest of all things - admit bad news.

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 choosing whether to work 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.

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