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## **SMOKESCREEN? MILITARY MEDIA RELATIONS IN 'GULF WAR I & II'<sup>1\*</sup>**

Concealment. Cover-up. Camouflage. Disguise. Façade. Masquerade. Deception. Restrictions. Guidance. Subterfuge. And, 'ETC' with capital letters. Or else, simply stated, the 'C' words of 'Censorship' and 'Control' with which officialdom, especially in liberal democracies, abhors to be associated. Or, its close virtual next of kin, 'Public Relations' and 'Propaganda,' which have been perfected over the years to practice acts of deception and concealment to camouflage reality behind the smokescreens of linguistic subterfuge.

To create issues of mass distraction, the armoury of those erecting the smokescreens to obscure the version of unwanted reality is ever growing and in a process of refinement. This is contrary to all the technological advancements that were expected to help the media unmask the virtual realities, especially in times of war. In this context, the similarities of issues and the way the media was controlled by the military tell a shockingly similar story in Gulf War I, parroted by the media on cue from those controlling the setting of the news agenda as 'Operation Desert Shield,' and 'Operation Desert Storm' and to the current War in Iraq (2003), or Gulf War II, as 'Operation Iraqi Freedom.' To borrow a Pentagon coined phrase, one is stuck by 'shock and awe' to see the helplessness of media organisations to learn the lessons from history while the state institutions, predominantly setting the news and information agenda, seem to be improving their skills for censorship, control, propaganda, or to use a more officially acceptable and practiced term, public relations.

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<sup>1</sup> For ease of reference, the 1991 War between the US led Coalition and Iraq would be referred as Gulf War I; the conflict between the two in 2003 as Gulf War II.

After detailing an account of what it was like ‘*trying to report*’ one of the ‘*most peculiar, even surreal of conflicts*’ (1) Alex Thomson, in his book ‘SMOKESCREEN: THE MEDIA.THE CENSORS. THE GULF.’ concludes, “It seemed to us the constant cat and mouse of reporters and soldiers would never be resolved, you just moved through a war from country to country and a new set of rules applied each time.” (2)

Apart from the now much acknowledged maxim on both sides of the professional divide of journalists and soldiers that the military and the media apparently have an intrinsic antagonistic relationship rooted in history because of the contrasting demands of the duties, one tends to disagree with Thomson that a new set of rules is applied each time in a new war situation. If the available historical evidence is used as a yardstick, it seems that the fundamental set of rules remain the same, with the demands and expectations made of journalists by the military as a result of the rules set more than 150 years ago, during the Crimean War, remaining the same throughout the turbulent, conflict ridden history since the mid Nineteenth century to the present times. The only things, which appear to have undergone some cosmetic change, are the ways and means of implementing what Thomson calls the ‘new set of rules.’ Despite differences in implementation of the rules, their fundamental spirit remains the same.

Attempts by the state apparatus to influence public opinion and war reporting in different ways is as ancient as the history of war, with the word propaganda making its appearance some 2400 years ago in Sun –Tzu’s *The Art of War.*’(3)

The earliest traces of strained relations between the journalists and the military in the beginning of the nineteenth century are evident in a correspondence by the Duke of Wellington to Lord Liverpool, dated 21 November, 1809:

“I beg to draw your Lordship’s attention to the frequent paragraphs in English newspapers describing the number of objects, the means of attaining them possessed by the armies in Spain and Portugal. In some instances, the English newspapers have accurately stated not only the regiments occupying a position, but the number of men fit for duty of which each regiment was composed; and this intelligence must have

reached the enemy at the same time as it did me, at a moment at which it was most important that he should not receive it.” (4).

Concerns voiced by the Duke of Wellington were repeated almost 50 years later at the time of the Crimean War by Commander-in-Chief of the British Forces, Sir William Codrington, as a reaction to Howard Russell’s reporting and as an attempt to control the information flow.

The general order issued by Codrington on February 25, 1856, must rank as the origin of military censorship. It forbade the publication of details of value to the enemy, authorised the ejection of correspondents who, it was alleged, had published such details, and threatened future offenders with the same punishment. (5)

The concerns expressed in the letters cited about non-disclosure of information that could be useful to the enemy or hazard ‘operational security’ have become an inevitable area of conflict between the journalists and the soldiers right till the present day throughout each conflict ever since.

Citing interviews with officials and journalists about the Gulf War 1991, Thomson informs the readers that military would censor anything perceived as a potential threat to the military units (6); operational security and morale of troops (7); or threaten to eject and arrest journalists who tried to do their job by reporting issues falling in the grey area which begins with the Ground Rules and stretches beyond them into highly questionable areas of censorship (8). Not much different from what Codrington tried to do in 1856.

Did it change in any way in the Gulf War II in 2003? Journalists who reported the recent conflict in Iraq (2003) are of the opinion that military personnel vetted all the reports filed by the British correspondents so that they did not reveal anything of significance to the enemy. That also meant anything that showed the forces in bad light. (9)

Luis Castro, a Portuguese TV journalist covering the Iraq War 2003, was physically tortured, accused of spying and arrested for two days by the US military.

According to Castro, the arresting soldiers kicked him in the ribs and accused him of spying, despite his journalistic credentials, in the following words: “Maybe you are here to show our position to the enemy.” (10)

Phillip Smucker, another independent unilateral journalist looking back at the travails of reporting during the Iraq War 2003 is of the opinion that military wanted to control the flow of information and put hurdles in the way of independent journalists not embedded with the military units. “They really did not want independent operators inside. They wanted people embedded with the forces. They tried their best to keep us out of the fray. And, wanted to make example of people who they could call on their rules, they have not obeyed the US military, therefore he has to leave.” (11).

Those who were not embedded with the military were targets for attack. The International Federation of Journalists accused the US military commanders of targeting non-embedded journalists. (12)

The attack on Al-Jazeera’s Baghdad office fuelled fears that the US deliberately targeted the Qatari station because it refused to play by White House rules” (13) Attacking TV stations critical of the US actions seems to have become part of a military doctrine as Al-Jazeera was targeted earlier in Kabul, The Iraqi Radio and T.V were attacked and Serbian TV blasted in the 1999 Kosovo War. All this fuelled speculation that the second Al-Jazeera attack was no coincidence, but a deliberate attempt to silence a trenchant critic of Washington. (14)

This was also meant as a signal to media organisations. If you are not with us, you are against us as public enemy number one. But of course, the media in UK and US was wise enough to follow the dictates and sanitise the war. Thus the necessity for the military to resort to such extreme measures in which a western media organisation is targeted, despite having given accurate satellite coordinates to avoid accidental attack as was the case with al-Jazeera, is yet to happen.

In Gulf War I, Thomson says the officials had made it clear that any reporters going to the front unaccompanied and not in an accredited military pool, would be escorted back to Dhahran. (15).

Besides the aim of bonding with the troops, the pool system in the Gulf War I was an effective way of controlling news. The aim of bonding with the troops was also achieved in 2003 to an extent with embedded journalists, despite the fact that the reporters knew it to be professionally wrong.

Giving account of his bonding with the troops in Iraq War 2003, BBC Special Correspondent for the Ten O'clock News on BBC1, Ben Brown says that after a particular incident in which their unit came under Iraqi fire and successfully repulsed it, he felt elated enough to kiss the gunner from Irish Guards. "It was a natural reaction I suppose, but later I was rather disgusted with my delight. Reporters are supposed to be observers of the battlefield, not participants. I wondered if, by being so close to the British troops, I had somehow crossed an invisible line." (16)

The US military planners coined the concept of embedded media during the Bosnian War with the aim of projecting 'transparency of our operations and the firmness of our purpose.' (17)

According to Dr Jewsbury, in recent arguments about the ethics of embedding, journalists have striven to assert that their integrity, their ability to smell a rat, to maintain their cynicism, remains intact. What the military realised early on, however, was that, so long as the *agenda* was set by them, it didn't really matter how it was reported. Could this be why 'non-embedded' journalists in Baghdad were labelled as the mouthpieces of the Iraqi régime by David Blunkett? (18)

Interestingly enough, the observations and question of Dr Jewsbury unmask the reality hidden in the easy to remember principles given to the British Forces for handling the embedded media during the Bosnian War. One of the principles stated: "handled well they will promote the unit's image." (19).

In terms of news coverage, the pool system and the embedded journalists during Gulf War I and II managed to do precisely that. They not only sanitised the war but also played the role of projecting the military image of coalition forces as desired to undermine the morale of Iraqi troops with images of battle preparedness

and high technology likely to be unleashed. Images much similar to the ones printed on pamphlets dropped by the US military's Psychological Operations Division, calling upon Iraqi troops to surrender. Only in this case, the media did the job of projecting the desired images for free. In short, they played the role pre-defined for them by the planners during the Gulf War I& II. The 'unilaterals' tried to bring out a version of news coverage free from control but more often than not, the independent voices were drowned in the synchronised symphony played from the official sources.

According to Normon Solomon, Executive Director Institute for Public Accuracy, " ... the scattered islands of independent-minded reporting are lost in oceans of the stenographic reliance on official sources." (20)

Yet, the media organisations believe, embedding has some advantages in bringing the correspondents to the heart of the action under the protection of the military. (21).

Moreover, those correspondents embedded with advancing coalition forces were able to file detailed reports of early action. Correspondents knew what they could and could not say and practiced self-censorship. Those who did not, like Fox News presenter Geraldo Rivera, were escorted out from the units with which they were embedded. (22)

Publisher of Harper Magazine, John MacArthur, termed the Gulf War II as probably the most self censored war in history. "Ninety Five per cent of the war coverage was beside the point. It had nothing to do with the war. If you watched it carefully, it was trucks rolling on a highway, trucks and tanks, boxes being loaded, GIs talking about feeling lonely. And, so on and so forth. Precious little combat and almost no scenes of gore, of human beings having their bodies destroyed, their lives taken from them by American bombs and bullets." (23).

Summing up how the American TV stations in particular covered the war, Mark Crispin Miller, author of 'The Bush Dyslexicon said, "Their primary obligation is to give us dazzling, heroic spectacle. Nothing goes wrong. Everything goes right. No one gets hurt. You don't see any bloodshed. You don't see anyone

bleeding on our side. You certainly don't see any atrocities. It's all going fine. And, if you question that, you are not a patriot." (24)

The images from the recent Iraq War led many an observer to make comparisons between reality TV and the war as spectator sport. Rolling news coverage and embedded reporting took us, apparently, right into the heart of the horrific action. And yet the coverage of this war was noted for both its inaccuracy and lack of objectivity. If we were getting facts around the clock, why did so many of those facts prove inaccurate? Given we were being taken into the heat of battle, why was our understanding of the causes and motives of the war confused, and why were political opinions never fully analysed? The decision to embed reporters with troops led to great footage but lousy reportage. No reporter, his or her life literally being protected by the military round them, was going to file a report saying, "the troops I'm living with are disgruntled. Their equipment doesn't work, they're probably blowing up children, and one or two of them are going to die." (25)

Thomson mentions that in 1991, war was viewed as video game in briefings for the press at Riyadh (26). "We had arrived at war-as-video-game, laughing at the way the US pilots could toy with Iraqi lives." He details how the human cost was obliterated from news coverage (27), how the smart videos supplied by the military anaesthetized the reporters to ask the real questions, answers to which could tell the public as to what was being done in their name was brutal, bloody and horrifying. (28). Apparently, large numbers of people wanted the video-viewpoint, the 'Riyadh reality' and the briefings kept the real face of war well and truly disguised. Lots of excitement, none of nastiness. (29)

To repeat the lessons learnt from earlier wars, the heart of the military's media operation on the ground during Gulf war II was a \$1million press centre in Gen Franks 's central Command Headquarters in Doha, Qatar. Inside, a converted warehouse, Gen Franks or Brigadier General Vince Brooks or any of the other military figures dribbled out information in front of the world's cameras. If it looked like a Hollywood set, that was because it was. (30)

Brigadier General Vincent Brooks, the chief US spokesman for the war on Iraq (2003) had had been well trained in the slippery art of public relations. He embraced warmly every question and then did his best to ignore it. His answers were always lengthy and earnest, and never curt and rude. To fill in the spaces, Brooks had a stream of civic lesson-type blandishments at hand. Questions about citizen casualties were parried with details about how the US tried to avoid them. Pictures of bombing raids were always bang on target, and never shown straying into suburban homes. Happy citizens were shown with smiling faces. Dead ones were collectivised as collateral damage, if they were mentioned at all. <sup>(31)</sup> Not much different from the scenario which Thomson describes about Gulf War I earlier

In the post-mortem of the war coverage, many journalists are of the opinion that the media failed to report accurately the number of Iraqis killed and presented a sanitised war.

“...And though we knew, day by day, the way that things were going, we deluded ourselves if we thought we were seeing war in the raw. This was sanitised version.” <sup>(32)</sup>

Jon Snow, Channel 4 presenter, in a programme about war coverage of the Gulf war II said the brutal reality of civilian death was not shown on British and American T.V. The viewers in Britain and America saw a war fought with clinical precision for humanitarian aims. <sup>(33)</sup>

In 2003, things were expected to be better, if for nothing else because of technology that could have helped journalists in reporting war without its fog. “A journalist’s kit has got smaller and lighter in the past few years. Satellite phones fit in the pocket; digital cameras sit comfortably around the neck. The videophone, with its jerky images can send pictures from the frontline without a bulky satellite dish seconds after events occur on the ground. But what had not changed was the fog of war, which meant it was hard to find out what was really happening.” <sup>(34)</sup>

As the long list of methodologies to spin and control information during the Gulf War I & II continues to grow, one is tempted to question the veracity of Thomson's assertion in view of constantly evolving history that if Gulf War I was really the 'largest international operation in media control' (35). This implies, on one level of interpretation that the media would be free from such control in subsequent wars. Comparison with Gulf War II and the accounts of journalists who covered it do not say so. Neither the history of war reporting in contemporary times which leads one to draw the conclusion that as an institution military is learning its lessons from each war to make its control further fool proof, while the media continues to blabber how it was duped, and that too in the post-mortem of the conflict in question.

But, in all this, did the readership know what both the wars were all about? Thomson provides an insight when he observes that reporting of Gulf War I, in the way it was reported, diverted attention away from the real fact. "It also deflected much attention away from Kuwait. That was what the war was about; the invasion of Kuwait and the seizure of her oil to be more precise. After a while, you could almost forget the basic fact." (36)

And, what about Gulf War II? Appears to be much similar to what Thomson observes. Analysts from The Guardian believe that the story of how Iraq 1991 led to Iraq 2003 is the story of a very American crusade. It is, at bottom a story about how a small group of politicians, policymakers and intellectuals, who came to be known as the neo-conservatives or 'neo-cons' came to get their way. (37)

What was Gulf War II all about then? Was it about weapons of mass destruction? Was it about a threat posed by Iraq to the US or the UK? Was it about regime change? Was it humanitarian intervention? Or was it about oil? Was the media able to look behind the smokescreens and remove the fog of war for the readers? If media shapes the public opinion, then the polls in both US and UK which cited majority support for war at the time bombs were taking innocent human lives, clearly point out that the western governments managed to build the case for war around virtual values. The antiwar protests, which preceded the war, died down. Majority believed whatever was being spun by the authorities and reflected in a synchronised chorus by the media. The lone voices of reason were bogged down. Those setting the agenda dominated. And the media, like Gulf War I, failed to look behind the

smokescreens and do its fundamental task of conveying a version of reality, which was not sanitised for any hidden reason, to its target addressees.

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