



War and Truth: Conflict, Security and the Media

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It is a portentous title, isn't it, 'War and Truth'? I can't claim copyright - it was invented by Peter Hennessey, so blame him!

I would like to begin with a word of thanks and warning: I am honoured to be the fourth Peter Nailor lecturer in defence in this series, which was opened by Sir Kevin Tebbit in 2001, followed two years later by Admiral Lord Boyce, and two years ago, by Sir David Omand. I did not know Peter Nailor well, but I do realise that our paths did cross, particularly at Greenwich, where I did the session on the military and the media at the staff course, but of course I know of his work and reputation. But I do wonder what he would make of me - a hack, a journalist, the lower pond life, reptilia, the fourth estate - giving a lecture in his name. My predecessors, in title and style, with two knights and a baron, you might question my title to be here giving this lecture, but I speak to you as a journalist and a reporter; the other party, the counterparty, in the dialogue with the community integral to the subject and themes of my three predecessor.

Defence, to be understood, requires a relationship with the media. My subject is the role of media reporting and journalism in our world today: how it informs or misinforms the collective memory, that pool of public information which will come to be known in time as history. In recent years, we have been wont to hear, particularly in defence circles, of the Revolution in Military Affairs, the RMA. I am sure Sir Michael Howard will be able to correct me on this in his response, but I believe that this expression has been around for rather longer than we think. I certainly have found examples of it towards the beginning of the 20th Century, and I think that it has almost been concomitant with the introduction of industrial warfare. But my subject is the other RMA, the Revolution in Media Affairs, and that has come so very swiftly upon us it is actually, in terms of the spectrum that I am going to give you, less than twenty years old. So it is a very swift and major change in terms of the way we receive news and how we digest news. It has brought us satellite, radio and television, the video phone, the mobile phone, and the internet - instant communication with the theatre of operations, the scene of action. In format, we have the blog on autonomous journalism, the free sheet, Talk Radio, and the players are the blogger, the citizen journalist, empowered by being at the scene with the means of communication, frequently a mobile phone with a camera facility. We had a very powerful example of that in the transport bomb attacks two years ago on the 7th of July. This has led to a huge expansion of what we must describe as the information space, making it truly global. But at the centre of this editing and management are becoming increasingly fragmentary, with a sense of growing uncertainty of exactly what their remit is and to whom they are transmitting the message. It is a fragmented medium.

This has been marked that this is an important component in the decline of what I would call metropolitan print media. In this country, we are still the world leaders for the national newspaper, but national newspaper readerships, I think the world over are in decline. The other part of my newspaper life has been working in Italy, and I have worked in and around newspapers there for more than thirty years. I find it quite striking because when I was shared from the BBC by the Corriere, Britain and Italy were roughly the same population, within a few hundred thousand. It is only in the last four or five years that the population of the British Isles has been increasingly significantly, and likewise, Italy has begun a serious decline, but it is still around, 56, 55 or 56 million. But think of this: the current daily newspaper readership in Italy is around two million, and going down, and I think we are beginning to see the same here. There are fewer journals of record. Another example case could be in the US, where the journals with a true metropolitan

reach, speaking for the whole of the domestic territory of the USA, could be counted on the fingers of two hands. I won't exaggerate - obviously, the New York Times, the Washington Post, the LA Times, the Philadelphia Enquirer, and so forth, are newspapers that you can buy in London, Paris or Berlin, but it is still in huge decline. That has been followed by centralised metropolitan broadcast news services.

We see, on the other hand, the rise of information by other means, particularly through the internet and broadcast through the internet. I think that even the BBC will acknowledge more young people in this country under the age of 25 receive what we would call news information through means like U-Tube, which is broadcast on the internet, than they do from mainstream BBC television news. This enormous change has given tremendous opportunity for those who can use the new means as not only instruments of propaganda, but for malign, offensive purposes. Let us paraphrase Clausewitz again: it is for them, for organisations like Al Qaida, the prosecution of war by other means.

So, faced with this enormous change and the fragmentation at the centre, what is to be done by the citizen and the community, the journalist, and the Government? Or do we just accept the situation and just shrug shoulders and say, as my friend Rupert Smith says, in his book, *The Utility of Force*, 'Media is like the weather and you must put up with it or work with it'?

Looking at this dilemma, I have come to some very provisional conclusions, and the accent is on provisional. No one agency in the present information and media spectrum can hope to dominate the information space. You cannot have total control of information now. I think that this is the dilemma that the generals in Burma/Myanmar faced, because even if they could shut down the internet, and we know they could, for a day or so, the news would get out by other means, through the periphery, particularly from travellers getting out to Thailand and neighbouring countries, including China.

This is where the propagation of notions such as 'global war on terror' gets into trouble and has got into trouble. There will always be competition out there for any notion of a single driving message and a single conception of reality. Therefore, given that, you cannot hope to dominate the total information space, there are vital lessons to learn in terms of defence, security, and public support: you have to control your own narrative, tell your own story, or someone else, not particularly well disposed very often towards you, will tell it for you.

In doing this, you have to work with some notion of truth. It sounds rather odd and naïve to say that, but let me expand a little: by that, I mean that one should ground truth, facts on the grounds you might call it. By this I mean that your narrative should be based on empirical testing and the discovery of facts, and they should be open to the ability to test them thoroughly and continuously. Now, this does not sit well with the commercial dynamics of much current media practice and much of current media structures, where they have the maxim, as you well know, 'Comment is cheap; news is expensive.'

I am coming to this entirely, at this point, as a journalist and a reporter. This is where I differ from my predecessors. I am an outsider, looking in. I have to slightly show the lining of my jacket here, the colour of my money: I am a reporter with some historical training and background and stimulation, which I still enjoy, and I continue to enjoy writing popular history and following some of the new and current thinking in history and historiography.

At this point, if you will forgive me, I would like to indulge myself in acknowledging the influences of my teachers: K. D. McFarlane, Karl Leizer, Angus Macintyre at Magdalen College; Franco Venturi, and A.J.P. Taylor, whom I came to know as a journalist, as his producer at the BBC; and finally, a remarkable Irishman called Liam Depoor. All did as great things for journalism as they did for history. By the way, I thought of trying to emulate Alan Taylor, talking without notes, but I would not remember even the meagre sprinkling of quotations that I have in this text.

I am aware of two awful warnings about journalists sounding off on platforms, from their armchairs, or in the columns of the Times and the Guardian, or even booming through the microphones in the cosy studio of the Today Programme. 'Any journalist who tells you he knows what's going on is probably missing the real story going on under his very nose.' That is a quote from the whodunit, 'Sinking the Unsinkable Rubber Ducks', out this year, by that master of tartan noir, Christopher Brookmyer.

But more poignant is something which think of and dwell on more and more, as well as depend upon it when I am out in the field: 'He who pretends to give an account of a great battle from his own observation deceives you - believe him not. He can see no farther, that is, if he be personally engaged in it, than the length of his nose.' This is Captain Mercer, reflecting on the first big engagement of his troop of the Royal Horse Artillery at Waterloo. He did write it with the gift of great hindsight, a long time afterwards, but I

absolutely agree with him

Now, to focus in on this question of the revolution in media affairs, we have two very convenient dates, and they are both 9/11. One is in the European and British style, and gives us the falling of the Berlin Wall: 9/11/89. The other in the American style, 9/11/2001, which marks the terrorist attack on America. But both of these events anticipate and come with major shifts in the way media performs and what it will deliver.

It was coincidental at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall, at the end of 1989, that we have the arrival of satellite broadcasting - 24/7 news and the concept of rolling news. The big question for this is whether there is enough news to fill that space.

The implications of this are realised in the 1990/1991 Gulf operation to oust Saddam's forces from Kuwait - Desert Chill, Desert Storm, Desert Sabre. I am sorry to be pedantic, but I loathe people calling it the Gulf War, because there was, immediately prior to that, as we all know, a really truly terrible Gulf War, which I was on the edges of, and which destroyed at least a million and a half lives between Iran and Iraq. But the characteristic of the war of 1990, and particularly the 1991 when the ground hostilities and the air offensive opened, is that instant broadcast came from the scene of battle, in a way that it had not before. This means that the media, and the reporter, is in the battle space. He or she becomes, willingly or unwillingly, wittingly and unwittingly, instrument and a participant, an agent by his or her very presence. They cannot claim to be spectators from beyond the boundary, like the Duchess of Richmond leading her party out to watch the Battle of Waterloo from a safe distance.

I will give you a clear example of this, which I witnessed. CNN had its site on the roof of a hotel in Dhahran, and one of their more handsome young reporters, inevitably known as 'the Scud Stud', Arthur Kent, was reporting the general aerial activity. He was absolutely beside himself after breakfast one morning because he said, 'Here come those four Tornados of the RAF, up from Bahrain and they're heading into Iraq!', and guess who was watching CNN at that time? The air defence gunners in the Basra box who had had their forward radar knocked out were indeed watching the broadcast in real-time. CNN had become, in the battle space, part of the forward air defence. This is very interesting: this was the CNN war as this was the time and the place when CNN made its name. It became a powerful advocate, and hence we get the piece of jargon - I think that is quite often misunderstood, but it is an important phenomenon known as the CNN curve.

Let me explain. The CNN curve says this: that when you have scenes of such egregious suffering or wrongdoing, the television medium becomes advocate and then jury, and tells the governments to act. It becomes a powerful lobby, which is unstoppable. And at this point in my narrative, in the March of 1991, it was so. CNN and the other networks like the BBC showed these dreadful scenes of the Kurds of the north being put to flight. They were truly awful images, with women and children being driven out of the villages. There were some reports, unconfirmed - I was almost on the point of getting a schoolmaster to tell me exactly what happened, but there may have been phosgene or mustard gas released from helicopters there. Anyway, large numbers of Kurdish folk were driven out of the north of Iraq and towards Turkey. Such was the effect of these images on television that we had the response something must be done. John Major, he seems to be the major protagonist, persuaded President Bush and President Mitterrand to react, and we had safe havens carved out of parts of southern Turkey and then northern Iraq, and this was called Operation Haven. It set off a course of events which has delivered a true autonomy for the Kurds. It led, through many twisted byways, to the present Kurdish Regional Government, KRG, the most stable part of post-Saddam Iraq.

But CNN oversold their position and oversold the case. Broadcasters particularly began to assume greater power than they really had or could really deliver. When my friend and colleague, Nick Dyne, was on a sabbatical at Princeton he carried out a wonderful study of the CNN curve, and it is still available in the public domain. He came to a very important conclusion about media lobbying, and it shows you where the interest and influence of media reaches its limit. The CNN curve, shows that governments and politicians will only react if there is a vacuum - in other words, if they have not made up their mind already and do not know what to do. If the CNN curve was as potent as some of its earlier protagonists might have claimed, we had millions of people throughout the country, certainly well over a million and a half, nearly two million, in the cities of this country, not just London, marching on 17th February 2003 to protest against the oncoming war in Iraq, and what effect did that have on the Blair Government? Absolutely none whatsoever! So it is not an inexorable law.

But what this new era of wall-to-wall broadcast of news brings to you, in what is already a highly narcissistic game, is a greater emphasis on performance. In a way that we has not happened probably

since Total War, when the Ed Morrrows were around, we begin to get the news brought to you by a personality - by Christiane Amanpour, by Kate Adie, by Martin Bell, John Simpson - and here the personality of the reporter almost becomes more important than the content. There is a terrible sort of vulgarism with this, because the most important figure in satellite broadcasting, live, round the clock, rolling news, is the person at the dish. It is not the person out in the field digging up facts, ploughing through mass graves or whatever, but it is generally the girl - I am afraid, since looks come into this - who is broadcasting who inevitably becomes absolutely dominant. They become acutely narcissistic actors in their own drama, and thinking they were actors in the real drama. This became very strongly marked in the Balkans, which was by no means the bloodiest conflict of the 1990s, but it was certainly disproportionately publicised with this kind of broadcasting. There was a lot of broadcasting from Africa, as you know, but very little in real time.

You get partisanship, and this is where I am at deep difference with my colleague and friend, Martin Bell, because he coined the phrase 'journalism of attachment'. I am really proposing to you a re-examination and a regeneration of journalism of detachment - just to give you a clue as to what all this is about. Martin believes that you have to take sides when you are faced with egregious crime and evil - crimes against humanity. There are Amnesty International awards for this, given for altruistic purposes, reasons, motives - I do not deny this. But this can go too much the other way, and it actually did in the Balkans, because too little was said for empirical analysis, objective assessment, reassessment, and detachment. Polemic has its place in reporting and journalism - that is trite, that is a truism, it is a cliché - but it has to be handled with care, because once partisanship pollutes a narrative, it is very difficult to recover.

Can I give you an example? On 19th December 1992, the Guardian published a full page news feature article about the rape of Bosnian Muslim women in the Bosnian conflict, which had been running since April that year. The reporter came up with the figure of 12,000 victims in eight months, according to unnamed, unspecified international aid sources. The same reporter, whom I will not name, reaches the astonishing figure of 20,000 Bosniac Muslim women who were victims by only the following February. So we have gone up by 8,000 within six weeks, again, according to unspecified international aid authorities. The Red Cross, for various reasons, is extremely wary about publicising its conclusions, but at a Reuters Foundation conference three years ago the chief spokesman of the International Committee of the Red Cross at the time revealed that, at the end of the conflict, after the Dayton Accords, the ICRC Central Committee ordered a full enquiry into these terrible allegations. By their, I have to admit, very strict, criteria the Red Cross could testify to only 237 cases of women from all communities in the three and a half years of conflict which we had come to by November 1995. But, the thing that worries me most is that, if you go and look on the websites, particularly of syllabuses for victim studies and feminist studies in the US, you will find the Guardian figure of 20,000 is still used, and you cannot get it back.

The other characteristic of the new communication, with the narrowness of the time of the link between the reporter in the field - between the discovery of the fact and the editorial process at base - is that you get a tremendous amount of backseat driving from base. You start getting the narrative space being shaped from the centre, and, though it has always been there, you will get more of the vision and the understanding of the centre and not the periphery.

Marvin Kalb, a colleague, a very distinguished foreign correspondent, and Professor of Communication at Harvard at about this time, reflected on how media was changing. It had become judgemental rather than narrative; based on opinions and judgments rather than sourced facts. The old BBC and Reuters criteria - which Alistair Campbell rather amusingly brought up in the Kelly affair - that you had to have two solid, trustworthy sources before you could go to air or go to print, was going out of the window very fast. Up until the 1960s and '70s, with the Vietnam War, those rules were rigidly adhered to, particularly by the two agencies that I was deeply involved with, the BBC and Reuters. Kalb said speed is important above accuracy, and it is populist - it is a news you can use. It becomes consumerist. And, of course, the emphasis is on youth, the elusive search for the younger reader and the younger listener.

The Murdoch press, unwittingly, came up with an ugly bit of jargon for all this: 'infotainment'. It was coined largely round the Murdoch press, so infotainment came in, by the way, long before Fox News. It is where information is weighted against entertainment, with the latter often having greater weight than the former. It was part of the entertainment business - titillation with your information... or without it.

Now we come to 9/11, my second benchmark, and the existential panic following it. Why was there this impact? This has been raked over time and again, but I will just quickly go through a checklist as I see it.

It was an attack on US metropolitan territory - the battleground was so clearly within the gate. It is believed to be one of the greatest photographed acts of concentrated killing on US soil since the Brady brothers, who had their very early camera teams at Antietam Creek to capture the famous sunken road, and the photographers were at Gettysburg and at Vicksburg in the American Civil War. It was shown, as we all know, in real-time, on television, so the drama was unfolding as the second plane went in.

Importantly, and I don't think we pay enough attention to this, it was a narrative given to the world through image rather than words. It was an apocalypse, partly or wholly, foretold, and I think that is the central element in causing the panic whose ripples we still feel.

This is quite difficult to explain, and at neo-con conferences that I have been at, or sponsored by well-known neo-con organisations, they find this impossible to swallow. The difficult one to explain is that there was a narrative out there, which was publicly accessible through the media, that something big and bad was going to happen to us, at home. The notion of a Jehadi threat that had an Islamist component was relatively recent in this story, but it had accompanied apprehension at the time of the Millennium with the year 2000 coming in. Rumours had circulated about plots to hijack or destroy airliners, inbound and out, from Los Angeles and over the Pacific, in and out from Manila, and we now know there is a certain amount of substance to that, because the evidence was discovered on the hard drives of the Al Qaida safe house in Kabul, which incidentally was not discovered by the CIA, but by the Wall Street Journal.

But we have to reach further back, toward the beginning of our Revolution in Media Affairs.

The alternative narrative, for those interested in the underground in the US, begins in a really emblematic event, with a resonance far out of proportion to its size. This was a standoff between a couple of farming families against federal agents - the Weavers and the Harris's - on August 21st 1992 at a farmstead called Ruby Ridge near Naples, Idaho, which is about as remote as you can get. There was a siege and deaths were incurred: a federal agent was killed, and a marshal was killed, and one of the Weaver's was killed, a teenager. This resonates right the way through until 9/11. It is celebrated in song, in ballads, in underground music. There is an alternative story. This was big, bad government at its worst. It was a conspiracy. Others charged it was a conspiracy of white supremacists, with the Harris family in particular, the mountain men, the militias of Montana and Michigan.

They achieved iconic status, and it got caught up in the great story which then shifts to the Mount Carmel Ranch of the Branch Davidians at Waco, where on February 28th 1993, the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives tried to raid the settlement. It was an extremely bloody encounter. I had to remind myself when I was writing this lecture just how dreadful the Waco incident was and how badly mismanaged it was throughout. Four agents and six Davidians were killed in the first action. There was then a long siege, to the 19th April 1993, and then 79 people are killed when the federal authorities were ordered to go in by Attorney General Janet Reno, including 21 children.

This is followed, on the anniversary, two years later, by the bombing of the FBI building in Oklahoma. Here, 168 people identified, and one possibly unknown were killed - there is one lived and they still haven't identified them.

It is very interesting how the conspiracy narrative about these events is maintained and sustained. Indeed, the sharpest observers of the political weaknesses of men, Bill Clinton, when he offered to his commiserations in his speech to the citizens of Oklahoma, paragraph five mentioned and warned against the false rumours being put around by Talk Radio.

Talk Radio is the shop jocks. They are still immensely powerful in the era even of the internet, and we are talking about pre-internet now. The most famous one, still going at the time of Oklahoma, is Lyndon LaRouche. One of his conspiracies was 'After all, it was all done by Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and with the help of the Special Air Service.' This sort of stuff gets out there. It may sound bizarre, but Simon Ingram of the BBC did an excellent reportage on the streets of Oklahoma City three years ago for Five Live, and the consensus amongst the vox pops was that the people behind it was a combination of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden!

So it is very difficult to extract these things once they start. But most interest, and most interestingly studied, is the event that happened just before Oklahoma right across the Pacific. It was on 20th March that members of the Aum Shinrikyo Cult released siren gas on the Tokyo Underground. Twelve were killed and 5,000 required treatment, most of them not seriously hurt. Very interestingly, Shoko Asahara, the founder of this strange cult, which has a strange amalgam of Hinduism and Buddhism in it, became a martyr figure in the literature and ballads of the US underground, mentioned in the same breath as David

Koresh, and the Weaver family, and the Harris family.

All this happens before the age of the internet. The first apocalyptic movement to use the internet in our cognisance - that is North European and North American, just to take note - is the suicide cult of Heaven's Gate.

So a kind of war was going on out there. These elements fed into each other with a single unifying apocalyptic vision, based on the shaping of an exclusive reality. Al Qaida plays into this.

But the shaping of information and versions of events to fit an exclusive, solipsistic and self-contained view of reality is of course not confined to one side. This solipsistic view and absence of debate has marked areas of the polemic of what we may call the neo-con view - we will create and shape our reality.

Just in case you think that this is a figment of my fevered imagination, my colleague, Ron Susskind, an outstanding investigative journalist and Pulitzer Prize winner, recalls a conversation with an unnamed Bush Administration advisor in 2002, who says, 'We are now in what we call the reality-based community,' which he defined as 'people who believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality'. He said that was how guys like Susskind and myself was things, but he went on: 'That's not the way the world really works anymore,' he continued. 'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality, and while you're studying that reality, judicially as you journalists will, we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors, and you, all of you, will be left to study what we do.' It is a narcissistic, almost paranoid, but certainly solipsistic view - it all happens within our own experience. That is why you get such a balance in this shaping of the approach to the shaping of the information space between Al Qaida, Jihadism, and people like the Shinrikyo Cult.

There was a very fine book, written by Japan's finest magical realist novelist, Haruki Murakami, who interviewed 250 people connected with the Tokyo attack, three years later. The most interesting part of the interviews is at the end with the 25 members of the cult, and this is where he draws out these characteristics. They have conceived, through their own jargon, through their strange cult, their strange theology, a view of the world which, as Murakami says, is detached from the reality which most of the rest of us enjoy. This is what I am trying to get at: ground truth.

So we have an alternative narrative out there. I am sorry about that digression, but I really had to explain what I meant by 'an apocalypse foretold'. As Abraham Lincoln said, in that pivotal phrase in his Second Inaugural speech given just a few weeks before he was assassinated, 'And the war came.' All the wars came - in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The aim in Afghanistan was, we know, to get at the centre of gravity of Al Qaida, the training camps in Afghanistan. But when we come to Iraq, things are rather different. The most curious aspect there is the attempt to shape the information battle; the space where information operations will be a vital part of the plan. I am willing to be stood corrected, but there is no full operational analysis of what went wrong with that information campaign. After all, the exiles around had assured us that 40% of the Iraqi Army would come across and be useable, and great skills in propaganda of all kinds were expended on trying to persuade the people to give up without a fight, but it didn't work. Nothing of that is mentioned in the public media.

Now, talking about the Iraq campaign, I will not go into the whole business of embedding. I see nothing complex, nothing controversial about it, because you have always had accredited correspondents with fighting forces. You have to have them, and they have to be guarded by rules of operational security, otherwise how are you to know the plan of what they are trying to do. You will never have total control of accreditation, access, and output, as the British authorities had in the Falklands. That will never come again. It was a peculiar circumstance - 32 of us, all white, all male, all British passport holders, covered the operation from the British side. If those in charge of accreditation to British forces tried to do it again in that way I would say it would be most foolish and counterproductive.

But, to an extent predictably, in the coverage of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the media arrangements of the forces were outflanked by the presence of the Arab media - Al Jazeera and Al Arabia. Just to give it a label, as I said, 1990/1991 was the CNN War, but this was certainly the Al Jazeera War. Exclusivity was no longer guaranteed. You would be broadcast from the theatre of operations by people who did not necessarily share your outlook or your culture. If you continue to prosecute the idea, which you must, then you are bound, unless it is a case of total threat rather to national survival, you must have a critical press. And actually, the American print press did extremely well, looking over their files, particularly from people

like Michael R. Gordon, the doyen of my trade as Defence Correspondence, from the New York Times. They could explain, very clearly, in a way that the good World War II campaign reporters reported, what the campaign was about, and actually quite quickly, as they did in Italy, Winfred Von Thomas was explaining to me, they were allowed to report critically of things going wrong, ten days after the event, in '44 and '45, and so the New York Times did.

But the great new dimension, apart from Al Jazeera, are people coming into your press conferences, to the general briefings and so on, and not sharing your point of view and not sharing your cultural base necessarily. An example of this was Salam Pax, the Baghdad Blogger, who is an architect and has English as his fourth or fifth language. He is obviously a highly intelligent man because his English may be a bit broken at times, but it is entirely accurate; there is very little ambiguity about his meaning. This is quite new. You had a very clear report from inside the enemy's capital saying what was going on. Also, after this, his extrapolation as to what was going on in the Shiite communities, particularly when, for the first time for many years, they could have their great festival of Ashura, and how important the political enfranchisement of the Shia clans and of the Shia parties, Salam Pax was blogging to the Guardian and explaining more clearly the importance and the impact of this than our Governments and our own metropolitan media.

The other thing of course, was hearing the voice and her words being read in extraordinarily poignant accounts from Riverbend, a woman living in Baghdad and just describing what has happened to her family.

With this, you get something else too: you get the soldier blogger. You get people telling you from the action, as it happens, and broadcasting to the world what happened. The most extraordinary example is this, Sergeant Kayla Williams. She had a rock band, and like many of her colleagues, she joined the forces to pay her way through college and was a very bright woman. She did an immersion course in Arabic, and was a front line interrogator. She was the first, in her blog, to mention the problems of a place called Abu Grab and the prison there. Kayla, in what she was writing at the time, then put together in a book she released, which is very interesting as to how the grunt thinks and what is going on in the ground, was deeply disturbed at the way villagers were just being shovelled towards Abu Grab, with a lot of them being banged up quite indiscriminately, at least, so she says, and as a lot of the subsequent reporting also says.

This is a problem for commanders now, because the blogger in your midst is a factor that is not going to go away easily. I say with absolutely no resentment whatsoever, when General, now Lord, Mike Walker was CDS, and the Black Watch went forward to Camp Dogwood, to provide support for the second American operation on Fallujah - and, by the way, do go and see the vernacular play because it is taken verbatim from soldiers called Black Watch which is coming on at the Barbican very soon - Mike Walker said the irresponsible reporting by the media had given away the position and compromised operational security of the soldiers.

It actually becomes more complicated than that, because as you will see from the Black Watch text of the play, the local reporters in Scotland were picking up the blogs, email messages, and reports of movements coming through to the Regimental Association at the Regimental Headquarters, and they were putting it, literally, on notice boards. From virtual notice boards, through the internet, it was there for all to see - 'plug it and play', as they say.

I will begin to wind up now: the internet is a large and uncontrolled conversation where rumour carries the same weight as a tested fact. It does have subversive elements and it does undermine because it is untested. You can therefore level the criticisms at it that were levelled at the Wycliffe Bible or the encyclopaedia of Denis Diderot, and it is different in quality from those two because of the unrestrained, uninvigilated nature of its conversation. But, alongside this, we should recognise it as the great crossroads of competing narratives. It is a threat to government and established media alike, both in their authority and their function, and they are in a muddle about this, as is illustrated in the lead up to the Hutton Inquiries, which ostensibly revolved around the authenticity of reporting of what the unfortunate Dr Kelly did or did not say and what his real role and importance was. Actually, if we look back on it - and this was the discussion of my immediate predecessor's main lecture, Sir David Omand, draws this thought: it touches the core of our debate about war and truth.

But of course what really was going on, what you really wanted to interrogate Alistair Campbell and Tony Blair about was why did the UK go to war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq in March 2003. This is a 'why?' which still lingers. Those of us for it and those of us puzzled and critical of it alike feel that it has not been explained properly, and with some justification. From January 2003, Tony Blair never explained. He never really explained his motive for this. It is not just 'why war?'; it is 'why now?' too, and 'why the particular

threat posed by Saddam and his forces?' and, because the Americans were going to do it anyway, I think it is just not sufficient.

We have the published diaries of Alistair Campbell, the sorcerer and the apprentice with Tony Blair, as I always see it, with him was the sorcerer and the other was the apprentice. But Campbell never confides, to dear diary at least, why we went to war, why, in Lincoln's powerful phrase, 'The war came.' It was more of a media battle, it was more his battle to dominate the information space, and I think that that is why his words will not cross that strange middle ground alluded so famously to by Alan Bennett in his play, 'There is no period so remote as the recent past.' That is the transmission ground between reporting and history.

Into this mix, we have to put the effectiveness of Al Qaida in creating their own narrative, based on fear without pity and without confirmation, and that does not have to be linked to facts on the ground. It can say what it likes, provided it can generate doubt.

So, in conclusion, what do we do? We have to maintain a balance of open enquiry. This depends on an open media and reporting, with the strict caveat of all that this means of operational security for the mission concerned, the nation and the community. But an open media is necessarily a vital part of civil society, and the dialogue between civil society and civil government. A media operation strategy which requires co-opting and coercing media is bound to fail. Media operations, in modern military parlance, can never be a part of psychological operations with black and white propaganda. Collusion, for a journalist, is the death of credibility. Open journalism must be based on reporting based on the facts on the ground, and not the opinion first.

My last job as a staff correspondent was with a paper where the editor's contempt for the reporters in the newsroom was, on a daily basis, barely concealed. He valued his own intelligence and the superior intelligence of his cronies who sat round in the editorial room.

This could, and should, be the tool of history, in measuring and understanding and evaluating and establishing context, and this is where, I understand what Alan Bennett is saying. But it is not good enough - 'No period so remote as the recent past.' For a journalist, it is not very useful, because we have got to get into that area that falls between immediate memory and the regions which can be susceptible and analysed by serious historical investigation.

But news, like Blair's and Bush's policies and visions of the world, is an increasingly context-free zone. It is as if the Talibanisation or the Taliban conversion of large parts of the Punjab now, as we speak and the historical power base of Ahmadinejad come to us out of the blue. But they do not.

I would love to go into the question of why journalism misleads - and it is to do with the economy, the commerce, and the very narrow market of media today. But that is my Sheherazad moment - that is for another day, for another day and a night of a thousand and one.

But I would like to conclude with a call for what cannot be left to one side: the fundamental question of war and truth. We need to restore the journalism of record and in the public service - public service broadcasting, facts, journalism of record. It is the missing volume in the vast library of media studies today. There may now be an argument for taking public service journalism of record away from the BBC and setting it up on a profit-free, trust basis. That, again, is up for discussion.

But I will leave you with this thought: we Italian journalists always love the line 'If it isn't true, it's well found'. It is a version of 'Don't let the facts get in the way of a good story'. Rather pompously, I am going to say to you that is not good enough. I am reminded by this of the splendid exhibitions last year, in London, of Holbein, particularly the picture of Christina of Denmark in the last poignant room there. Truth must be the basis of journalism of record, tested, retested, revised and revisited, but above all, it is the truth that must be spoken unto power that the independent journalist must aspire to.

Michael Howard

Well Robert, you wondered what Peter Nailor would have made of that. Peter Nailor is a dear old friend of mine. He was one of the first generation of what are now called defence academics, that is to say, people in universities who felt that defence had to be studied as carefully, accurately and with the same scholarly discrimination as economics, sociology or any of the other activities of society which is so significant for us in our own day. He was one of those people who were anxious to link speculation and scholarly analysis with the brute realities of what was actually going on on the ground. I think that what he would have made

of that lecture would have been that it was great!

Robert, you referred to yourself as the pond life of war and indeed of the world. Well, that was the attitude of the great Lord Kitchener, who, when he was interviewed by journalists after the Battle of Omdurman, simply said, 'Get out of my way, you drunken scum!' I don't think anybody in the Twentieth Century, and certainly the second half of it, would dare say that to journalists, however much they might deserve it, and very few of them did. In the Second World War, the great journalists of the West, people like Alan Moorehead, Christopher Buckley and Ernie Pyle, were the people who not only transmitted and created the narrative, but it was a narrative that one trusted because one trusted them. They were men of great physical courage, tested every day, of scrupulous accuracy in their transmission of facts, and of balanced judgement in the way in which they dealt with matters.

We have had equally eminent journalists in our own time: Sir Max Hastings is one; and you, Robert, are another of them. It is because you have shown, in your whole career, precisely those qualities, of courage, accuracy, and balanced judgement, that we have listened with particular interest to what you have had to tell us. We have taken on board all the problems which you have described to us, and we will go away better informed, and I would like to say, infotained, with the emphasis on information rather than on entertainment, but nonetheless entertainment. Thank you.

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