War, Journalism and History

War Correspondents in the Two World Wars

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With a foreword by Phillip Knightley
The academics who took part in the War, Journalism and History Colloquium at the University of Edinburgh were delighted with the intellectual stimulation of the day’s debate and the challenging new research and theories it produced. There was no reason for them to anticipate the historical significance of the occasion, for it is only now becoming apparent that the participants were describing and assessing a form of journalism that was already dying.

War journalism feels, like war, as if has been around forever. But it only really dates from the Crimean War of 1854 when William Howard Russell of The Times of London became the first civilian to send back to his newspaper reports of what was happening at the front. Until Russell came on the scene there were no reports at all or generals reported their own battles.

Russell’s influence was enormous. For the first time a British army in the field was subjected to independent scrutiny and was found wanting. But Russell faced the problem that has haunted war correspondents ever since: how much could be told without endangering the war effort? As he wrote to his editor: ‘Am I to tell these things, or hold my tongue?’.

The editor told him to go ahead and those reports he did not use in The Times, no doubt from apprehension that the newspaper would be accused of being unpatriotic, he circulated among Cabinet ministers, a process that eventually toppled the government.

The military was quick to realize the danger that this new form of reporting posed to its very existence and fought back, denying journalists access to the front lines, refusing information, interviews, guidance, support and courtesy. ‘Out of my way, you drunken swabs’, roared Lord Kitchener.
The military’s methods became more sophisticated as it realized the war correspondents were here to stay and that it would have to coexist with them. Over the years it has tried censorship, appeals to the correspondents’ patriotic instincts and, perhaps most successfully of all, recruiting the war correspondents into the overall war effort.

Owen Dudley Edwards, who was Reader in Commonwealth and American History at the University of Edinburgh, now Honorary Fellow, described in his presentation how Charles Masterman, head of the War Propaganda Bureau, organized a secret meeting of Britain’s leading writers and journalists in 1914. They included Conan Doyle, Arnold Bennett, John Masefield, G. K. Chesterton, Sir Henry Newbolt, John Galsworthy, Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling and H. G. Wells. Their recruitment into the war effort to write pamphlets, books and newspaper articles that promoted the government’s view of the war was kept from the public until 1935.

The government was more direct with frontline correspondents. The six major ones were put into uniform and given honorary status of captains. They were provided with orderlies, lorries, cars, conducting officers and censors. When one of them asked General J. V. Charteris how much of an action he would be allowed to report, the General replied ‘Say what you like, old man. But don’t mention any places or people’.

They soon caught the mindset of the military they were supposed to be covering. One of them, Sir Philip Gibbs, wrote after the war: ‘We identified absolutely with the Armies in the field [...] We wiped out of our minds all thought of personal scoops and all temptation to write one word which would make the task of officers and men more difficult or dangerous. There was no need for censorship of our dispatches. We were our own censors’.

The French were no better. Newspapers and reporters were subsumed into France’s ‘Union Sacree’, that sacrosanct union of forces in France which conducted the nation’s war. As described by Dr Tom Quinn, of University College Dublin, this system was so constricting that France’s greatest journalist, Albert Londres, abandoned his attempts to cover the war and devoted himself to ‘finding new measures of truth-telling’. He argued that censorship had an alienating effect on language and the nature of truth. So in a war-torn world where you could not believe what you read, the troops responded by printing their own newspapers in the trenches,
and poets and novelists began to grapple with the task of finding new ways of presenting the truth about war. Londres posed the question that has concerned journalists ever since: ‘How close can the war correspondent get to the pain, or to the truth? In a world of disintegrating narrative, what are the possibilities for the creation of a new narrative?’.

The search continued in the interwar years but the outbreak of the Second World War produced a major setback. The correspondents again became an integral part of the war effort and they were described by General Eisenhower as ‘assimilated officers’ or ‘quasi staff officers’. A few were uncomfortable with the description. One, Charles Lynch, a Canadian who had been accredited to the British Army for Reuters, wrote, ‘It is humiliating to look back at what we wrote during the war [...] We were a propaganda arm of our governments [...] We were cheerleaders. I suppose there wasn’t an alternative at the time. It was total war. But, for God’s sake, let’s not glorify our role. It wasn’t good journalism. It wasn’t journalism at all’.

The debate was still going on fifty years later in Vietnam. American correspondent Michael Herr wrote that conventional journalism was the problem: it could no more reveal the Vietnam War than conventional fire power could win it.

British correspondent Gavin Young agreed. ‘How can one depict the human facts of such a complete tragedy? What of the thoughts and feelings of the Vietnamese? How, if at all, have the Americans been changed by contact with the Vietnamese?’ Young concluded, ‘The Vietnamese War awaits its novelist’.

But news is meant to be instantaneous, especially with a twenty-four-hour a day continuous news cycle. It cannot wait for the reflections of the novelist. So the old dilemma remained – the military wanted to conceal all; the media wanted to reveal all.

The two sides thought about it and met to discuss it. At the meeting the BBC broadcaster, Sir Robin Day, said he doubted whether a democracy would ever be able to fight a war again, no matter how just, because of the way TV news would portray the horror of battle. The military took the warning seriously and the hunt began to find a way to manage the media in wartime. The United States led the way and the Department of Defense came up with a plan that it put into effect during the invasion of Iraq.
Its essence can be summed up in four points. Emphasize the dangers posed by the Iraqi regime. Dismiss and discredit those who cast doubt on these dangers. Do not get involved in appeals to logic but instead appeal to the public’s hearts and minds, especially hearts. Drive home the message to the public: ‘Trust us. We know more than we can tell you.’ The Pentagon believed that this plan could not only shape opinion in the United States but all over the Western world. It was proved right.

A lot of thought went into controlling the correspondents. There had to be an appearance of openness and truthfulness. So briefings by officers trained to deal with the media were held at Central Command Headquarters. These briefings gave an official overall view of the war’s progress. But correspondents clamoured for their own dynamic take on what was happening at the front and the freedom to report it. The difficulty was that every system that the Pentagon had tried for managing correspondents had aroused their ire precisely because the correspondents felt that they were being managed.

This time the military incorporated them into the national war effort by enlisting them and their organizations into the service of the country, exactly as it had done during the Second World War. In practice, this meant that the Pentagon offered media organizations, both American and foreign, the opportunity of ‘embedding’ a correspondent inside a specific military unit for the duration of the war.

The ‘embeds’ had honorary officer’s rank and could wear uniform if they chose. Their unit provided them with accommodation, transport, food and protection. The ‘embeds’ accompanied the troops into action and could in theory write what they liked as long as it did not reveal information of value to the enemy.

But no matter how determined the correspondents were not to lose their journalistic objectivity and maintain their distance, once the war had started almost without exception they soon lost all distinction between warrior and reporter, and identified themselves with their unit, even to the extent of helping with the fighting. The relationship had come full circle and was back to World War One again. No wonder a disgruntled reader wrote to the editor of The Guardian newspaper saying, ‘Despite scouring
two national newspapers every day, listening to the radio, surfing the web and watching TV news, I have absolutely no clue how the war is going.’

It grew worse. One American critic described the lack of sustained TV reporting on Afghanistan as ‘the most irresponsible behavior in all the annals of war journalism’. And when NATO attacked Colonel Gaddafi’s forces in Libya, it flew 26,000 air missions and not one of them was covered on TV. This means more illustrations were published at the time of the fighting in the Crimean War, more than 150 years earlier. This is a sad commentary on today’s status of modern war correspondents and raises the vital question: how much longer can they survive?