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Truth Under Fire War and the Media

Gary S. Messinger

Over the last hundred years, the relationship between war and mass communication has become increasingly elaborate. Governments and private-sector organizations have found more and more ways to use the media in wartime, and the range of available technologies has expanded to include print, film, radio, television, and the Internet. The system that exists today, at the start of the twenty-first century, is the product of many twists and turns over the decades: an accretion of some strategies for wartime use of mass communication and a rejection of others. An understanding of this evolution is a starting point for crafting policies to minimize the perverse effects and realize the positive potential that mass communication holds.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, two technologies played key roles in wartime mass communication. During the Crimean War (1854–56) and the American Civil War (1861–65), the telegraph came into its own as a means for commanders to exchange battlefield information and for newspaper reporters to send dispatches to their home offices. Telegraphy became even more important by the end of the 1800s, when cables laid on ocean floors transmitted strategic information while western armies and navies fought for control of overseas colonies.

But for most people at the start of the twentieth century, the mechanized printing press was the major tool of mass communication in wartime. In response to the growth of an ever larger reading public, made possible by increased opportunities for education and the collection of large populations in industrial cities, an extensive print culture arose, based on magazines, low-priced novels and anthologies, and, most of all, newspapers. Every industrialized nation had its powerful newspapers, like *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* in Britain, Joseph Pulitzer's *World* and William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* in the United States, *Le Matin* in France, and the *Berliner Abendblatt* in Germany. No matter whether they emphasized crime and gossip for the lower classes, or intellectual and analytic pieces for the upper classes, all the papers catered to readers' desires for the latest information about military activity. In Britain, for example, during the Boer War (1899–1902), the populace eagerly bought up issues with the news from South Africa; men wearing sandwich boards with the latest headlines walked through city streets hawking the papers.¹ Readers also by now had come to believe that a paper's point of view could affect the outcome of a war. When the *Manchester Guardian* took a position against the Boer War, police had to guard its building for several months to protect the staff from mobs gathered outside.² In the United States, William Randolph Hearst helped

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to precipitate the Spanish American War (1898) by publishing stories implicating Spain in the sabotage of the battleship U.S.S. *Maine*. In addition to publishing war-related maps, illustrations, detailed statistics, and eyewitness accounts of the wars they covered, newspapers also assigned flamboyant writers — war correspondents — to provide colorful, opinionated, dramatic accounts of battles and the lives of the troops. William Howard Russell worked for *The Times* during the Crimean War. Hearst's star correspondent, Richard Harding Davis, became famous for his reports on the Spanish American War. During the Boer War, the young Winston Churchill greatly advanced his career through the exciting eyewitness accounts of action that he published for the British *Morning Post* while also serving as a Lieutenant in the South African Light Horse.³ Even when no war was officially in progress, the press might play a role in increasing tensions. In England, France, and Germany, in the decade preceding the First World War, newspapers were full of stories about construction of new battleships, along with serialized, fictional, often frantic accounts of events like invasions of secret fleets of armed tugboats that might occur if one country were to attack another.⁴

The Great War

The First World War (1914–18) expanded the connections between combatants and the Home Front via mass dissemination of information. The War touched the lives of entire societies. Reporting on the War became each paper's most important occupation. The War presented publishers with complex challenges: how to gain access to the Front to cover battles, for example, and how to balance the desire of readers for complete information against the need to censor coverage that might provide advantage to an enemy. These problems were not new, but they now had to be faced on a vast scale and with very large consequences. The most able journalists, like the American Heywood Broun of the *New York Tribune*, managed to write excellent reports in spite of the sometimes arbitrary censorship of generals, like Haig from Britain, Foch from France, and Pershing from America, and Admirals like Beatty in Britain, who were out of date in their understanding of the growing importance of public opinion.⁵

The Great War marked a major expansion in the relationship between the Press and governments. Prior to 1914, in election campaigns, political parties tried to influence the Press, but government was seldom involved directly. Occasionally a governmental leader might use information provided to the Press to affect public opinion, as, for example, Lord Palmerston did in the mid-nineteenth century when he cleverly managed gossip and newspaper stories to whip up mass support for his continuation of the Crimean War. All such instances were, however, on a relatively small scale — tied closely to a single figure and focused on specific tasks carried out by small staffs for small amounts of money without much thought about long-term or massive involvement by government in similar tasks. Thus, for example, in the decade before the First World War, the British Foreign Office still had only a small group of people to deal with the Press, and high-level diplomats who were recruited mostly from the aristocracy, usually remained aloof from reporters, whom they saw as members of a lower class.⁶ As the First World War progressed, however, officials became increasingly aware that control of information could mean the difference between victory and defeat. They realized that reports could be timed to affect the



fighting spirit of troops; news could be withheld to deny an enemy an advantage; false information could confuse an enemy; a carefully colored story could stimulate patriotism; a persuasive article or book could win supporters for a cause, especially if it were written by someone prominent. These things had long been known, but now people began to see that if all the elements of persuasion were managed and coordinated, as only government was large enough to do, then a new and powerful tool — official propaganda — might take its place as part of a nation's arsenal, along with the machine gun, poison gas, the tank, the submarine, the airplane, and other weapons that were discovered in the First World War.⁷

Increased governmental influence upon mass communication took many forms. It might be simply a heightened awareness on the part of officials of the need for more frequent contact with the Press, or a growing skill in answering reporters' questions, or regular meetings with groups of reporters, that is, press conferences. Governments might commission authors to write articles that could be placed in newspapers by friendly editors. Authors could be paid to write books favorable to official policies and the government could subsidize printing and distribution of the books. Speakers could be hired by the government to inspire local and foreign populations and garner media attention. Similar strategies could be employed for other media like the visual arts. For large-scale efforts to influence public opinion, official bureaus and directorates, staffed by specially trained civil servants, could be created.

Germany manifested an interest in governmental manipulation of opinion very early. There was a strong belief among German military leaders, particularly in the army, in the doctrines of Karl von Clausewitz, who had argued, earlier in the nineteenth century as he viewed the rise of the nation-state, that the morale of troops and civilian populations was becoming an important variable in the calculus of war. Some of these ideas were merely germinal in Clausewitz's writings, and, as one who valued a sense of proportion, he probably would not have approved of the way in which German military planners developed his concepts. In any case, by the end of the nineteenth century, pursuit of such ideas led to consideration of morale in the war plans of the German general staff, with certain personnel assigned operational responsibility. *Schrecklichkeit* — the calculated use of terror as part of a lightning-like disabling of the enemy designed to win quick victory and minimize casualties on both sides — was the concept that tied German military propaganda activities together. Almost from the first day of the Great War, the German army was circulating propaganda among its own troops, enemy troops, and civilian populations encountered as the army advanced. The civil government's entry into propaganda began well before the War. In the 1880s, to help gain greater control over German public opinion, Bismarck had set up a small Press Office (*Presseamt*) to monitor news coverage and release information favorable to the government. Such activities were expanded by Bismarck's successors. Upon outbreak of hostilities, the civilian government was able quickly to issue pamphlets, brochures, doctored news stories and other forms of propaganda that supplemented the military's efforts. The material was circulated throughout Europe, as well as in the United States, Latin America, and elsewhere. But German efforts to manipulate opinion suffered from organizational confusion. The various offices responsible for propaganda production argued with each other about control, competed in the *Reichstag* for budgetary appropriations, and frequently conveyed contradictory messages to the public. An especially large problem for the Germans was failure to understand foreign audiences. There was a blustering quality to much of the German rhetoric,

caused by overcompensation for the nation's recent arrival as an international power, and the consequences of growing up in an autocratic culture where debate was not always allowed, practice in listening to opposing points of view was limited, and the process of motivating audiences by persuasion rather than blunt assertion was not well understood.⁸

French experience with wartime propaganda was in some ways similar to German. The late-nineteenth century dictator Napoleon III was a demagogue who censored and bribed the Press. Moreover, when the Great War began, French officials frequently squabbled among themselves as to who would control press relations. A central office to work with reporters, the *Maison de Presse*, was not established until 1916. Nevertheless, the French were able to use media effectively because of centuries of experience coordinating the national bureaucracy, a patriotic willingness to cooperate for the protection of the nation they loved, and a cultural heritage that equipped them to understand diverse audiences and the art of motivating people by methods other than command. The result was strong loyalty to the war effort at home and considerable sympathy for the French cause in other nations.

Belgium, almost completely overrun by the Germans in the first few days of the War, was a conquered nation that could not conduct propaganda from home except in a small part of its territory. The Belgians relied on France and Britain for propaganda assistance. Italy was another example of a peripheral participant, given the many factions jockeying for governmental power and the country's frequent switches in policy. It never crafted a coherent propaganda strategy, although it had some success, such as the respect it gained after publishing stunning photographic accounts of Italy's Alpine campaigns.⁹

A late entrant in the field of official attempts to use the media for purposes of war was the United States. Already before the War, there were growing connections between press and politics, as exemplified by leaders like Theodore Roosevelt who were sensitive to mass attitudes. America was also a leader in the recently discovered art of movie making and in the emerging profession of commercial advertising, both of which were mobilized for war. When America entered the war in 1917 on the side of Britain and France, a euphemistically named Committee on Public Information was set up by the federal government to coordinate relations with newspapers, publish books and pamphlets, and recruit speakers to build civilian and military morale. Civilians joined in. For example, silent movie stars like Mary Pickford took part in Liberty Bond drives to raise money for the war effort. In spite of its size, however, America was almost as peripheral in propaganda activity as Belgium and Italy. Before 1917, America was not generating propaganda. It was, instead, a theatre for the propaganda struggle among nations already in the war. Moreover, most of America's official structure for propaganda was simply borrowed from the French and British. America's greatest influence upon media discourse during the war may have been President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, which, he said, America was fighting to defend. The initiative radiated idealism. It was also a masterful use of the latest techniques of mass communication. Wilson packaged his pronouncements as a series of "points" to accord with the belief of advertisers that brief, arresting statements were the ones most likely to capture the attention of modern audiences.¹⁰

By far the most sophisticated users of mass communication during the Great War were the British. Much of the work of justifying the British cause was quickly assumed by non-governmental organs of communication. Given Britain's great



literary tradition and its longtime familiarity with political debate, the rhetoric often rose to high levels of eloquence. But newspapers also circulated hate speech and stories of atrocities committed by the enemy, describing German factories that turned human bodies into glue, whether these could be documented or not. Because so much propaganda was being produced voluntarily, the government decided to limit its role in media manipulation. This strategy was partly the idealistic reflection of long-time British belief that government should exemplify civility. But the calculation also relieved the government of the need to decide how far to go in supplying certain kinds of opinion manipulation. The state did go too far in censorship, particularly when it issued the Defence of the Realm Acts (1914 and later), which made it easier to imprison highly vocal pacifists and radicals. And the government did have highly dishonorable lapses in rhetorical restraint from time to time. For example, early in the war, Prime Minister Asquith persuaded the distinguished jurist James Bryce to issue an internationally publicized report that greatly exaggerated the extent of atrocities committed by the Germans and diverted attention from cruelties practiced by the British in Ireland.¹¹ Similarly, later in the War, the government paid large sums of money to reprint and disseminate cartoons drawn by the Belgian artist Raemekkers that purported to be true records of German violence toward civilians.¹²

An important feature of media relations in all the belligerent countries during the Great War was the willingness of large numbers of prominent writers to endorse armed conflict. There were important dissenters, to be sure, like Bertrand Russell in Britain and Eugene Debs in the United States. But the general willingness of intellectuals to support their governments was conspicuous. In Germany, for example, ninety-three prominent thinkers, like Gerhart Hauptmann, Max Planck, and Wilhelm Roentgen, issued a manifesto during the earliest days of the war to support their country's attack on Belgium. In Britain, in the first months of war, authors who expressed willingness to assist the government in its propaganda efforts included Arnold Bennett, Robert Bridges, G. K. Chesterton, Arthur Conan Doyle, John Galsworthy, John Masefield, and Gilbert Murray. Owners of newspapers like *The Times*, the *Daily News*, the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *Spectator* were equally willing to assist the government. As the War went on, an increasing number of prominent writers and press lords served as directors of offices related to governmental publicity. Arnold Bennett was in charge of British official propaganda in France; H.G. Wells directed propaganda against Germany late in the war; the press barons Lord Northcliffe and Lord Beaverbrook were each for a time involved in overseeing large governmental offices of propaganda; and the head of official propaganda mid way through the War was the novelist John Buchan. The government co-opted the talents of these men, but also wisely gave them latitude in the way they directed official propaganda, and all were allowed to continue their private careers without being required to curtail other activities or sign special secrecy agreements. There was a gentlemanly aspect to it all, a chivalric quality in press-government relations that was not to be seen in later wars.¹³

Throughout World War I the printed word was the most important medium of communication in the battle to win loyalties and affect morale. Not only were newspapers, books, and pamphlets used; the war also stimulated experimentation with other forms of print communication, like the leaflets dropped by the millions from airplanes and balloons that made their way behind enemy lines. But the War also stimulated limited use of other media. The Allies used hand-operated gramophones

in battles against the Austro-Hungarian armies. The Allied armies loudly played recordings of the national anthems of the many discontented ethnic groups that were under the rule of the Hapsburgs, frequently prompting soldiers from these nationalities to desert.¹⁴ All the powers experimented with use of silent films. The Germans, for example, produced documentaries that made their case powerfully, foreshadowing that country's post-war prominence in cinema. On the Allied side, the first official production was *Britain Prepared* (1915), which showed soldiers in training and Home Front scenes emphasizing loyalty and spirit. Several scenes showed the Royal Navy. These unfailingly brought British audiences to their feet in wild cheering, making contemporaries very interested in the potential of imagery in motion to touch the deepest chords of a nation's sense of itself. A later production, *The Battle of the Somme* (1916), featured actual footage of British fighting men in battle, although it was later discovered that some of the scenes had been staged. *The Battle of the Somme* was the first instance of a war film showing the dead. At a time when popular sensibilities were still largely Victorian, these scenes ignited a national debate on whether it was proper to photograph such things.¹⁵

Still photographs, paintings, and drawings were used to great effect during the War. These were especially effective with upper class audiences when presented in traveling exhibitions or in prestigiously printed publications.¹⁶ For reaching broad audiences, the most powerful visual medium, by far, was the poster. Even today, many decades later, the first thing that comes to the minds of many people upon mention of the First World War is the military recruiting poster that showed Kitchener (Uncle Sam in the United States), soberly staring at and pointing at the viewer, with the words below, "I want you." The poster that shows a young father sitting comfortably at home in civilian clothes, with his daughter next to him asking "What did you do in the War, Daddy?"¹⁷ is another powerful example.

In each belligerent country, wartime propaganda exploited symbols known to be important in that national culture. The United States emphasized the theme of American innocence: its finest young men made the journey "over there" to rescue a sinful Europe and defend the goddess who was enshrined in the nation's most famous statue. The French emphasized protection of their superior civilization and *la belle France*. Germany portrayed itself as the victim of all the nations that were conspiring against it, the bringer of its superior *Kultur* — particularly its great science, literature, music and philosophy — and exploited stereotypes of sinful French and unscrupulous English commercial travelers that were already widespread. Propagandists elaborated age-old. Proven techniques of wartime inspiration, in which one keys off of great national epics and sagas and justifies wartime conduct as the acting out of the latest chapter in an ancient, primal drama of survival and morality.¹⁸

In view of the large role that the media played in the Great War, particularly when conjoined with government, it is somewhat surprising that so much of the organizational apparatus for that activity was abolished almost immediately after the war ended. In Britain, for example, by mid 1919, nearly all of the governmental offices related to propaganda had been abolished. At the Paris Peace Conference that same year, none of the delegations brought large press staffs with them, and the collection of reporters sent by major newspapers of all the countries was surprisingly small in view of the fact that the fate of millions was being affected by the peace negotiations. Why was this so? One hypothesis is that many people still did not fully appreciate the importance of public opinion in mass society, let alone the techniques



by which it could be affected. The wartime experience with media, though intense, may have been too brief and too much confined to certain groups for everyone to sense all its ramifications. An important fact was that the exhaustion of war led many people to want to destroy all the weapons of destruction — not only tanks and battleships, but also the tools of propaganda. This latter factor was much more important in democratic countries, however. From the early 1920s onwards, there was a growing divergence in attitudes toward media manipulation in democracies and in those countries where dictatorships were taking root — most notably Mussolini's Italy, the new Soviet Union, and, from 1933 onward, the Germany in which Hitler was chancellor. These societies were all too willing to continue exploring the relation between war and media.¹⁹

A large part of media discourse during the War was mature and responsible, even in the more autocratic countries like Germany and Austria-Hungary, and censorship policies were, for the most part, reasonable. But excesses did great, long-term emotional harm. The tendency on all sides, to portray the War as a great crusade of right against wrong, resulted in huge disillusionment afterwards, when people learned about secret treaties, war profiteering, errors made by political leaders and admirals and generals, the true extent of casualties, and the barbaric ways of killing practiced by all the belligerents. In works like *The Sun also Rises* (1926) by Ernest Hemingway, *Goodbye to All That* (1929) by Robert Graves, and *The Road Back* (1931) by Erich Maria Remarque, authors struggled to come to terms with the general mood of sadness, anger, irony, and cynicism that the combination of death, censorship, and media-fueled hatred had produced. The disarmament negotiations during the 1920s, to make peace permanent, were undercut by the images of evil the media had circulated during the War. Stereotypes of barbaric Huns, perfidious Englishmen, and sly Frenchmen remained in people's minds, making it harder for negotiators to trust each other and easier for the masses in each country to consider engaging in another war to obtain revenge. An especially fateful after-effect of the media's role in the War was the skepticism it produced regarding atrocity stories. From the early 1920s onward, as the work of the Great War propaganda agencies became widely known, most people operated on the assumption that atrocity stories were false until proven otherwise. Few men and women were disposed to believe the information about concentration camps and other forms of barbarity that started to come out of Central and Eastern Europe in the 1930s, even though much of the information was accurate.²⁰

The Second World War (1939–1945)

When the Second World War began with Germany's attack on Poland in 1939, the major powers ruled by dictators were already prepared to launch detailed plans for media campaigns. Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, and the leaders of Japan had all been impressed by the potential disclosed during the First World War for use of mass communications as a weapon. In addition, Stalin had personally witnessed the effects of propaganda during the Russian Revolution and the coming to power of Lenin (1917 and after). After gaining control of the Soviet Union, he evolved additional means of opinion manipulation, like the "show trials" in which his opponents blurted out engineered confessions to juries and the foreign press.²¹ Japanese leaders used their invasions of China and other countries during the 1930's as testing grounds for adaptation of western propaganda techniques to an Asian context, assert-

ing the value of their “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” in newspapers and even on postage stamps. Japan portrayed itself as the lead nation in the struggle to drive white western imperialists from all of Asia.²² In each of the dictatorships, by 1939, all forms of mass communication were placed under tight governmental control. Within the respective governments, large bureaucratic departments were created for this purpose. Additional bureaus coordinated propaganda directed at combatants and civilian populations in enemy countries, to neutrals, and to the home front. The controllers of these efforts, like Joseph Goebbels in Nazi Germany, became well known figures as the war went on.

In democratic countries, wartime mobilization of the media took longer. All of the liberal western nations had severely curtailed their official propaganda activities after the First World War, and, almost in denial, had been reluctant to develop plans for any future efforts to control wartime opinion. In some of the liberal countries, like France, questions about wartime communication soon became moot, because these nations were quickly conquered and had to adopt the limited means of opinion manipulation available to resistance movements and governments in exile.

In Britain, however, a coordinated approach to wartime use of media did eventually emerge. By 1940, the government and the private sector had re-learned the lessons of experience and had established structures of media cooperation through official bureaus like the British Political Warfare Executive (PWE) and the Ministry of Information, based on the model evolved after 1914.²³

In 1941, after it entered the War, the United States went through the same process of slow mobilization of media as Britain. By 1942, nevertheless, most of its structures of wartime use of media were in place, coordinated by various military bureaus and for civilian audiences by the American Office of War Information (OWI). Like the British, Americans followed models from the earlier world war. In both Britain and the United States, however, structures for coordinating war and media were much more elaborate than in the Great War. More media were involved: not only great numbers of newspapers and other forms of print media, but now, as large industries in their own right, radio and film.²⁴

Still photography played a large role. For *Life* Magazine, Margaret Bourke-White produced powerful images of Russia’s participation in the war. Photographs taken at the Normandy Invasion in 1944, by Robert Capa, and the famous image of Marines atop Mt. Suribachi in Iwo Jima in 1945, taken by Joe Rosenthal, became icons.²⁵ The British produced plucky films like *Waterloo Road* (1944), depicting home-front steadfastness and kindness. Hollywood signed on for the duration, producing numerous documentaries like *The Battle of Midway* (1942), directed by John Ford; crude films like *Hitler’s Children* (1943); and sensitive if occasionally saccharine works like *Mrs. Miniver* (1942).²⁶ Personalities already made famous through the media did their bit. Kate Smith, the radio singer, performed “God Bless America” at War Bond promotional events. Bob Hope and Bing Crosby entertained soldiers and sailors in combat areas. It seemed that no opportunity for communication was overlooked. Late in the war, at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., a leggy Lauren Bacall sat atop a piano and sang wartime melodies played by President Harry Truman. Advertisers in U.S. and British magazines rushed to emphasize their patriotism. In the United States, a magazine ad for Lucky Strike cigarettes said the logo on the packs was “the smart new uniform for fine tobacco.”²⁷

In the Second World War, democratic countries faced new challenges regarding regimentation of media. This was dictated by such factors as enlarged use of



espionage and the need to keep knowledge of scientific and industrial processes out of the hands of the enemy. Heads of propaganda bureaus were required to sign confidentiality agreements; publishers and filmmakers and other controllers of opinion in the private sector were expected to be discreet; and there was extensive censorship; although it was never as severe as in Fascist and Communist countries. The western media often censored themselves, for better or worse, without governmental prompting. In China, for example, reports on the setbacks of Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists, submitted to his employer Henry Luce by the American journalist Theodore H. White, were regularly re-written by Luce to build home-front morale and discredit the Chinese Communists.²⁸

The philosophy underlying the propaganda in Communist and Fascist countries in the Second World War can be described as “bio-behavioral.” It reserved some space for the kind of intelligent reference to great national epics that had been the dominant approach to propaganda in the First World War. One thinks, for example, of the German film *Triumph of the Will* (1935), directed by Leni Riefenstahl. It is morally repugnant in its glorification of Hitler, and yet it is an act of genius, not only in its mastery of cinematic techniques, but also in its stirring use of symbols from Germanic literature and Wagnerian opera. But high-minded reference to great cultural traditions was not the chief characteristic of Second World War propaganda in Fascist and Communist countries. Dictators started not from the Enlightenment premise that people were fundamentally rational and altruistic, nor from religious premises that viewed people as capable of kindness and moral vision, but from an attitude that defined all humans except a small elite as little more than animals with large brains. In the 1920s and 1930s, new insights about human nature, based on the emerging branch of the social sciences called Psychology, were making their way into the cultures of all the industrialized countries, as the influence of thinkers like Freud, Jung, and Pavlov began to be felt. These principles, which helped people to understand the large influence of trauma, reflexive behavior, and subconscious motivations, were often used for great good — for example in the appearance of psychoanalysis as a new tool of medicine. In the minds of demagogues, however, the influence of notions picked up from Psychology was perverse. In his self-pitying autobiography, *Mein Kampf*, written in 1923, Hitler compared the mass of humanity to dogs that could function only in packs commanded by their strongest members. In the techniques of mass communication that he developed during his rise to power, and then in even more elaborate form after he became Chancellor, Hitler assiduously put his views into practice. By the time of the Second World War, the same pattern was visible in all the dictatorships. The result was mass communication that relied on heavy-handed repetition, deception, and censorship intended to warp people’s understandings of reality, assertion of the importance of unquestioning obedience, and portrayal of the enemy as a beast intent upon stealing the territory of other populations, or at least as a personality intent upon lessening the home population’s status and fragile sense of emotional well being.²⁹

This kind of opinion manipulation was initially rather effective. At first, for example, many listeners in Allied countries were affected by the radio broadcasts of Tokyo Rose³⁰ and Germany’s Lord Haw Haw, who served up doctored news reports and insinuated frightening images of defeat into the minds of western audiences. Bio-behavioral approaches to media were also used in democratic countries. A new term, “psychological warfare,” made its way into language. (Variations included “psych-war” and “sykewar,” and the military shorthand “PsyOps” for “Psychological

Operations.”) But the deficiencies in this form of communication eventually became apparent. In the dictatorships, those in uniform and in the civilian population grew tired of all the mechanical repetition of information and evolved ways of using gossip and private conversation to transmit facts needed for a clearer understanding of reality. Germans could not ignore defeat in Russia in 1942. The Doolittle air raid over Tokyo, early in the war, did not square with home front propaganda. By 1944, the Japanese press felt forced to tell the public of setbacks and the need for the populace to prepare a “front behind the front,” that is, to get ready for combat on the home island.³¹

In democratic countries, where some degree of freedom of circulation of information was always present, bio-behavioral approaches to wartime communication were overshadowed, from the beginning of war onwards, by use of the more traditional, myth-based techniques that had been dominant in the First World War. There was almost no use of media in fascist and communist countries as noble as Edward R. Murrow’s wartime radio broadcasts to America, or the film version of Shakespeare’s *Henry V* (1944), with its evocations of heroism in battle, that Laurence Olivier produced in Britain, or the wartime broadcasts in exile that Thomas Mann made to his countrymen.

One of the important questions about use of media in the Second World War concerns what might have happened to further dehumanize participants if the conflict had gone on much longer. The battle of stereotypes between Japan and the Allies raised the question in its most sobering form. On both sides of the Pacific War, and among both private and governmental organs of mass communication, the struggle included a form of racism — Asians against Europeans, yellow-skinned peoples against whites — that was not part of the war in Europe. In their films, newspapers, posters, radio broadcasts and all other communication arenas, the two sides dehumanized each other with ever increasing virulence. Westerners spoke repeatedly of Japs, Nips, little men, monkey folk, and members of the “horde” that would carry off naked white women and dilute the racial strength of the West. Late in the war, David Low, the distinguished editorial cartoonist for British newspapers, went so far as to advocate “war without mercy” against the Japanese. On the Japanese side, there was a fixation on ancient cultural values of purity and purification. Western leaders were compared to power-hungry ogres familiar to those versed in Japanese literature. Black Americans were described as eager to help the Japanese so they could be liberated from the tyranny of light-skinned races. Images of Japanese swords (and, by extension, bayonets), long understood as tools of purification, were widespread. Centuries-old fears of invasion by foreign demons were evoked continually. On both sides, by the last year of war, the hateful use of symbols was almost as egregious as the portrayals of Jews in Nazi media. It was an open question just how vicious the media battle might have become in a longer conflict.

An encouraging element in this story is that the hatred transformed itself after 1945. Just as there was a new friendship with Germans in the post-war period, helped by the Marshall Plan, so, also, in Japan, former combatants worked together to craft a postwar peace. Japanese “little men” now were portrayed fondly by westerners proud to protect them from Communism, and the Japanese in turn welcomed the strength and assistance of the west. And yet, the tendency to dehumanize did not go away. Japanese and westerners both found new overseas enemies toward whom they directed their symbolic disrespect. Western media



started referring to Communist Chinese and North Koreans as “gooks.” Racist imagery of this kind even began to appear in children’s comic books. Then later, westerners found it difficult to see the North Vietnamese as real people when war expanded in that part of Asia.³²

The Cold War and Media

When the Second World War ended, the victors quickly dismantled the highly regimented structures of media coordination that had existed in Germany, Italy, Japan, and certain other countries. Steps were taken to establish the kinds of relations between governmental and private organs of mass communication that were familiar in peacetime in liberal democratic countries. But, because the Soviet Union was one of the victors, no-one could force it to abolish regimentation in Russia and countries like Hungary and Poland that came under Soviet control. Nor did any of the victors have the power to dissuade China from mobilizing its mass communications when the Communists created the People’s Republic in 1949. For these reasons, the western powers did not radically dismantle their structures of wartime media coordination as they had after the First World War. Instead, they modified what already existed and then even went so far as to export the model to other countries, not only ones that had recently been enemies, like Germany and Japan, but also other states in regions like the Middle East and Latin America. “Manipulation of opinion now took place in an environment where everyone struggled to avoid another world war, because of the possibility of nuclear annihilation, but localized wars, like the ones in Korea (1950-53) and Algeria (1954-62), were acceptable; violence took place behind the scenes in the form of covert action instigated by espionage agencies; and a worldwide effort to win over populations through mass persuasion was regarded as essential. In some ways, as a result, the connections between war and media became more important than ever.³³

As in earlier eras, non-governmental organs of communication eagerly signed on for the struggle. The western media profited from reporting on and fictionally portraying the Cold War — whether in prize-winning books and newspaper stories by writers like James Reston and Harrison Salisbury of the *New York Times*,³⁴ or in James Bond movies — and saw it as their patriotic duty to help affect the outcome. Much of the use of media in “the free world” was crude. Non-governmental media efforts were often hateful, inflammatory, and paranoid, filled with stereotypes and as harmful to mass emotions as similar conduct had been earlier in the century. Because of a variety of developments, governments intensified these tendencies. One factor undermining civility was the increase in connections between governmental opinion manipulation and espionage. Agencies like the USIA³⁵ and the British Council, which were mandated to promote understanding, were pressured by agencies like the CIA and the British M.I. to color their communications in support of clandestine efforts against unfriendly rulers. Another factor was the feedback effect of battling against the bio-behavioral approaches to opinion manipulation that were still dominant in the Soviet Union and were being adopted by the Chinese Communists. Particularly in America, the need was felt to counter such efforts with more of the same. As a technologically oriented nation, with a tradition of isolationism and not much capacity in the foreign languages that are the gateways to other cultures, America found the repetitious, mechanical aspects of bio-behavioral communication tempting. Soon, American governmental propaganda exhibited fetishistic

over-reliance on hardware, collection of un-synthesized data, and simplistic messages that did not resonate with foreign audiences. As years went by, and the western powers enlarged their “information agencies” (read: propaganda ministries), all of these problems were intensified by bureaucratic obesity. An influential book published in 1970, by Senator J. William Fulbright, entitled *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine*, vividly documented the weaknesses in the system.³⁶

Another important development in the early years of the Cold War was the growing influence of television. Although it came into existence before the Second World War and was used by the British, television did not achieve widespread influence until after the Second World War, when its use expanded in Western Europe and the United States. Television soon rivaled, and in some cases clearly overshadowed, the influence of other media. After 1964, when America passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution and escalated the war in Southeast Asia, the power of television was clear for all to see and hear. Each night, viewers in many countries could learn the progress of the war and could, in the many cases where censorship did not succeed, observe the true violence of battle. There were great print journalists, like the Americans David Halberstam and Frances Fitzgerald, and the British reporter Jon Swain, who personally covered the Communist takeover of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in 1975. But because of television, this was, as commentators pointed out, the world’s first “living room war,” and widespread questioning of the worth of that war was one byproduct.³⁷

The End of the Cold War and After

As the standoff between communist countries and the west continued, most of the patterns related to mass communication remained the same. Not even the fall of the Soviet Union (1991) changed media matters appreciably. Although the world became, in diplomatic terms, multi-polar, governments continued to use mass communication to win allies, and private sector organs of communication continued to report on and fictionally portray, with the same mixture of enlightenment and narrow-mindedness, the many small wars taking place around the world.

But soon there were large changes. One was the increased ability of television, from the 1980s, to present images of war “live” — that is to say, in real time — because of technological advances like portable cameras and satellite transmission. Two landmarks were the coverage of the Iranian Hostage Crisis (1979-80) by the American Broadcasting Company, and the twenty-four hour a day, seven days a week coverage of the Gulf War (1991), by the American Cable News Network (CNN), which made international media stars of on-the-scene correspondents like Peter Arnett and Christiane Amanpour.³⁸ These developments, intensified during the Yugoslav conflict (1999), greatly increased television’s dominance in coverage of wars compared to other media. They also had the effect, paradoxically, of making war both more and less real to viewers. On the one hand, images of death and destruction, victory and defeat, strategic decision-making and legislative debate could all be viewed as they were happening and in an almost intimate manner. On the other hand, the opportunity to feel as if one were part of the action, to enjoy the suspense, and yet to know that one’s own life was not at risk, created an appetite for war as media drama, along with a habit of pretending that war was not real.

Late in the twentieth century, connections between war and media entered yet



another stage, as the computer revolutionized society worldwide. One consequence was the speed and freedom with which print reporters became able to transmit their stories about wars. Earlier, they had used telephones or short wave radio for instantaneous transmissions. These methods were cumbersome. Getting to a phone or radio was not always easy. Moreover, access to phone lines could be denied, and radio transmissions could be jammed. With the coming of the Internet, however, filing stories became easier. Working from a laptop, a cell phone, and a satellite hookup, a reporter could file a story almost anywhere and at any time. After being edited at the home office, the story could be quickly integrated into the paper's layout and distributed in hard copy and on the worldwide web.

Another late-century development was the growing tendency of television viewers to regard war as an electronic game. Increasingly, the images of war that appeared on TV screens were presented in formats like those to be found on computer screens. To increase understanding and to feed appetites for excitement, television packaged conflicts as phenomena similar to the war games one could purchase for recreation. Unreality became all the greater as military organizations expanded their use of computer based techniques like the siting of targets through global satellite positioning, enhancement of night vision, and direction of bombs and missiles by means of heat seeking devices. On their television screens, viewers were able to watch all of these devices in actual use. Now, in the era of Cyber War, there were two barriers insulating people from the realities of pain, maiming, terror, and death. Those who fired the missiles and dropped the bombs were not in face-to-face combat with the people being killed. And those who viewed it all on television or their computer screens were yet another step removed.

A Look at the Future, with Some Recommendations

In spite of the vast importance they have assumed in today's world, the connections between war and media are still not well understood. A common sense response to the long history of the relationship suggests that wars and mass communication interact in a deadly serious manner. But the exact role of media in wartime, especially its propagandistic forms, remains to be identified; for example, among civilian populations, how much of the hatred that appears in wartime among civilian populations is induced by media portrayals of events, and how much by real events? We also need to know more about the effects of mass communication upon the military. For example, some research suggests that the fighting spirit of soldiers is not appreciably affected by actions such as dropping leaflets from the sky, directing radio broadcasts at troops, or circulating videotapes, but has more to do with obvious physical realities like casualty rate and adequate food, plus home-front sociological factors that determine small-group cohesiveness in battle, that is, loyalty to one's unit. The links that can be seen most easily are probably the ones that involve censorship and deception. When the media are able to withhold basic information from fighting units and the home front, or to circulate wrong information unchallenged, then the controllers of those media are affecting people's fundamental constructions of reality, and wartime decisions regarding advisable actions will be made on that basis. We do know, in any case, that the role of media in wartime ought not to be ignored.³⁹

Mass communication can be used in wartime for good causes, like minimization

of violence and the hastening of peace. Everyone has heard the song “Lili Marlene.” It began as a poem by a German in 1915, to which a German composer added music in 1938. In the Second World War, with help from the media, it was adopted by soldiers, sailors, pilots, and civilians on both sides of the conflict. It was a noble example of media helping people to transcend hatred in the midst of violent conflict. But the record shows that wartime media can also warp our minds. When used for evil, media have a way of scarring the souls not only of those to whom the messages are directed, but also those who use mass communication for such purposes.

As we head into the twenty-first century, alertness will be needed, because the relation between war and media is changing yet again. Throughout the twentieth century, questions about war and the media were pretty much questions about interactions between states in highly industrialized societies. But the destruction of the World Trade Center and subsequent battles in Afghanistan and Iraq revealed new developments. Wealthy but not broadly industrialized or urbanized societies, like Saudi Arabia, are developing very large capacities for use of mass communication and are training publicists to make the views of non-western nations known. Moreover, exploitation of media can now be asymmetrical. It is no longer routinely on the model of Tokyo Rose against Bob Hope, *Pravda* against the Voice of America, large nation-states against each other. Now, non-governmental organizations, including terrorists, are gaining access to communications networks, as the broadcast of videotapes of Osama bin Laden on the Arabic television network *Al-Jazeera* indicated. Extensive analysis of such developments will be necessary.

The worldwide uproar, in May 2004 and thereafter, in reaction to photographs documenting American abuse of Iraqi prisoners, is especially significant. Within hours of their appearance in the *Washington Post*, the pictures were being viewed all over the world, and more images, from both Western and non-Western sources, as if a war of images was in progress, followed in the days and months thereafter. The velocity of distribution was not unprecedented. Powerful images from earlier wars, like the mushroom cloud over Hiroshima in 1945, were transmitted just as soon as they were publicly available. But the saturation of information in May 2004 and thereafter was probably unprecedented. The images of Hiroshima could only be transmitted instantaneously to specific outlets, for example by wire among newspaper offices or in rare cases by television. The images published in the *Washington Post* and elsewhere in 2004 were made available via the Internet and through television networks that reached billions of viewers. The impact of such quick sharing of information, made possible by technology, was a new development in the long story of the relation between war and mass communication.

The manner in which images became public raised important ethical questions for the media. Many of the images were leaked — given illegally — to journalists by individuals in the military and other behind-the-scenes intermediaries. The *Post* and other media outlets then had to decide whether to disclose the information to a broad audience when confidential investigations into prisoner abuse were already being conducted by the U.S. military. Disclosure carried with it the potential to humiliate the individuals shown in the pictures and to compromise the rights of defendants and make certain lines of investigation impossible. News outlets decided to publicize the photos nevertheless, in order to raise larger issues concerning management of the war in Iraq and the possibility of violations of the Geneva Conventions. The ethics of the media’s conduct in publicizing all the images are likely to be debated for many years to come.



The photographs were also a major example of the power of information, almost by itself, to alter the course of a war. There had been examples of this phenomenon in earlier decades. In the Vietnam War, for example, disclosures of American misconduct, most notably at My Lai, made continuation of the conflict more difficult. And, as long ago as the Boer War, newspaper revelations of British mismanagement had helped to end that conflict. But it is difficult to recall instances in which a specific body of information — in this case a set of images — ever caused such extensive mid-course changes in the pursuit of a war. In the United States, the Iraqi prisoner abuse scandal set in motion revisions in military command structure; the White House was forced to regroup; and voter support for the war in Iraq declined. There were parallel repercussions in Britain. Simultaneously, international willingness to assist America weakened, and already unfriendly populations in the Middle East brought added pressure on Americans to leave. The photographs also damaged American honor. They provoked large doubts about America's claims to be bringing freedom and respect for human rights to the Middle East, and they made it much more difficult to think of the United States as a moral leader in the world.

The Iraqi prisoner abuse scandal provided yet another example of the need to understand and ameliorate the effects of the uses of media in wartime. Here are examples of ways to hasten that process:

- Additional funding should be made available for training in foreign languages. U.S. governmental agencies make major mistakes in communication with and about other countries because so few Americans understand other languages and the cultures embodied in those languages. Isolationism will not change appreciably until language competency expands.
- A growing body of research and scholarship in America is being devoted to the study of hate speech. At many law schools, for example, efforts are being made to draft model legislation that prevents expression of hate while preserving constitutional rights. Much of this work is centered on America — naturally so in view of our racial and civil rights struggles. The effort to define and limit hate speech should be internationalized. Through such means as grants, Justice Department initiatives, and United Nations conferences, efforts should continue, with the goal of designating hate speech in support of war a crime against humanity.
- Misuse of mass communication during wartime is in some respects a public health issue. For example, children traumatized by violent images spread during wars may suffer for many decades from limited emotional and social capacity. Grant programs like those at the National Institutes of Health should be broadened to stimulate improved methods of responding to such situations.
- The media should spend more of their time and money to deepen understanding of connections between mass communication and armed conflict. There is some discourse along these lines already, not least of all in the eloquent memoirs written by many reporters. But too much of the conversation is impressionistic, mired in the present, anecdotal, not informed by the work going on in fields like history, ethics and psychology. Conversely, academics need to be less aloof. Reporters, media owners, social scientists, and scholars of culture need to talk to each other more often — not preach at each other, not condescend — but learn from each other.⁴⁰

- Funding for international cultural and scientific exchange should be expanded. Philanthropy, government, and the corporate sector are not doing enough.

- Information technology companies now earn huge profits by marketing to the military in many countries. Infotech companies have become part of the worldwide arms trade. They should set aside part of their profits to support studies of the relation of their activities to war, and ways to lessen harmful use of information technology while still allowing for defense. The companies should do this through their own philanthropy, and in response to tax incentives, governmental matching grant programs, and public service requirements analogous to those for television and radio. Included in the self-examination should be discussion of the Internet, which is quickly taking over some of the roles played by print media in the last century.

- Continuing efforts need to be made, through such means as legislative hearings and journalistic exposes, to decrease the extent to which secrecy affects the behavior of governmental agencies and multi-national corporations. No one doubts the need for some secrecy, especially in times of emergency. But, at least since the start of the Cold War and the growth of the “national security state,” fear has been used as an excuse to conceal actions of government and business that do not need to be secret. Control of large bureaucracies and the large amounts of money and power they possess is at stake. People do not give up such things easily, especially when secrecy is used to avoid accountability. The more that secrecy becomes business as usual, the more freedoms will be eroded and decisions made based upon erroneous information. The challenge of eradicating secrecy based on disproportionate responses to threats has become even greater in the post 9/11 world.

- Great creative minds should continue to direct their powers to helping the world understand the connections between force and opinion. In the weeks after 9/11, the power brokers in Hollywood held a widely publicized meeting with President Bush and swore an oath that they would produce more films promoting international understanding. Where are those films? And, did publishers hold similar meetings? During the twentieth century, books like George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945) and Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* (1941), and films like Jean Renoir’s *La Grand Illusion* (1937) and Stanley Kubrick’s *Paths of Glory* (1957) helped us all to focus on our common humanity. Let us hope for more such works in the future. ❀

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