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War and Censorship: A Necessity?

By

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WAR AND CENSORSHIP: A NECESSITY?

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Ladies and Gentlemen I feel honoured to have been asked to address you on the topic of War and Censorship. English not being my mother tongue you will excuse me reading from the manuscript. I will begin by discussing some historical aspects, since the experience we have made during the Gulf War are by no means new. Since it is my opinion that it is not necessary to discuss extensively the quality of reporting the Gulf war again I will concentrate on theoretical aspects. Especially the ideas of Carl von Clausewitz, the Prussian general, the theory of Georg Simmel, the German sociologist, and the concept of paradoxical communication. It is my thesis that free journalism, the objective reporting of the truth and war are incompatible with each other.

Let me mention the fact that last week the newest edition of the Annual Review of Sociology has been distributed. John Modell and Timothy Haggerty discuss in an article The Social Impact of War - and it is surprising – the effects of war on freedom of the press are not mentioned with a sentence.  

AND SO TO POINT ONE: THE HISTORICAL ASPECTS OF WAR REPORTING.

Stories about wars have been retold in Western culture since Homer. And from the beginning of written history the use of propaganda was a central aspect of warfare. Herodotus, Greek author of the first narrative history of the ancient world, is not only the father of history writing, he can be also described as hired press agent for the Athenian state. Herodotus was not interested in writing history objectively. He allowed his sympathies and antipathies to flow into his writings. The 333 BC war of the Athenians against the Persians was depicted in a way which highlighted the weaknesses of the Persians and the merits of Athens in liberating Greece. Herodotus manipulated facts and his history writing was plainly tendentious. It was a programmatical

call to Greece to unite and conquer Persia. It was an attempt to strengthen the readiness for war in Greece.

Alexander the Great can be described as the creator of the first "war reporter unit". Reports written to serve his ends were sent to the Macedonian court, multiplied there and disseminated with propagandistic intent. Callisthenes, who always accompanied Alexander as a kind of court historian, spread the claim that Alexander was the son of the supreme god Zeus. This idea was confirmed by the oracle of Didyma - surely under the influence of Alexander’s "PR-department", which probably made skillful use of the oracle’s utterance: It is very difficult to fight against the son of such a powerful god.

I’LL LEAVE IT AT THESE EXAMPLES TO SET THE TONE. LET ME NOW ADDRESS THE PROBLEM OF NEWS REPORTING IN THE MODERN MASS MEDIA.

The discussion about news values, i.e. the criteria by which news is selected has a long tradition in Germany. In 1690 Tobias Peucer submitted the first dissertation on newspaper publishing. He argued that as a choice had to be made from almost countless events, those things worth remembering and knowing should be chosen for publication. He named among others war and peace enterprises, war causes and war intentions, battles, defeats, military leaders’ plans. Indifferent, unexciting things were not worth reporting. The execution of criminals was such an event not considered to have news value.

If we examine the historical dimension of news values empirically with the aid of content analysis we can establish how news selection has changed over time. Wilke has done this in Germany analysing newspapers published in the period between 1618 and 1906. Media reality has changed drastically. In former times the newspapers reported mainly about the political and military events which no longer applies today: "Seen relatively, one can now speak of a marked... demilitarisation of media reality. Formerly the

readers of the newspapers were presented the picture of a world dominated much more than now by war and military action."³

Very soon military leaders considered the war reporting dangerous for the achievement of their war aims. On December 21 1809 Duke Wellington wrote from Badajoz to England:

"I beg to draw your Lordship's attention to the frequent paragraphs in the English newspapers describing the position, the numbers, the objects, the means of attaining them possessed by the armies in Spain and Portugal. In some instances the English newspapers have accurately stated, not only the regiments occupying a position, but the number of men fit for duty of which each regiment was composed; and the intelligence must have reached the enemy at the same time as it did me, at a moment at which it was important that he should not receive it."

This argument that reporting about the conduct of war could be advantageous for the enemy became the standard argument for the justification of censorship. Winston Churchill expressed this idea by saying: "The BBC is the enemy within the gates, doing more harm than good."

The first professional war correspondent, William Howard Russell, was systematically hindered by the military from doing his work. In 1854 Russell was sent from the editor of the Times to the Crimean in order to report about the war. The eyewitness accounts of Russell resulted in an outcry of the public. Russell described the horrors of war, the dying of the soldiers, the fright of cholera. The Secretary of State for War, Sidney Herbert, hoped that the army would lynch Russell. Lord Clarendon, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, considered the effects of the reporting to be disastrous for the image of the army. Russell was accused to commit high treason. In an article published in the Times of 23.10. 1854 he had given details about the number of British canons and their locations. The Russian Secret Service, so the accusation, had telegraphed this information to the front and the

Russian general staff had exploited this favourable opportunity. On 25.2.1856 a general order by General William Codrington established censorship.

Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria, tried to counter the effects of Russells reporting. The photographer Robert Fenton was sent to the Crimean. His order: "No dead bodies." And Fenton obeyed. The image of the war presented in his pictures was that of an adventurous trip of path-finders; war looked like kind of a hunting party. Here we have an example for an early propaganda fight at the domestic front against grumblers.

Worth to be mentioned too is the fact that the public was prepared for the war by a media campaign. Martin argues concerning the influence of the press on the origin of the Crimean War: "A few selected incidents of atrocities may create a picture which will compel us to quite irrational action. An extraordinary rapid switch took place. The public... was actually in a state of alarm about a supposed plan of invasion by Napoleon III. Yet in the course of a few weeks the public was persuaded that Napoleon III was our disinterested ally in a war against the wicked Tsar."  

NOW LET ME COME - VERY SHORTLY - TO THE QUALITY OF REPORTING THE GULF WAR.

In Germany the war reporting on television was ridiculous: We did not get any information, but this non-information was televised for hours and for days. The main information was that the journalists complained about having no information. The journalists made fools of themselves, but the recipients were not in a laughing mood. Never before journalists with so many pictures and so many words delivered so little information. Later we only got the information presented by General Schwarzkopf (Storming Norman), who presented his video show in camouflage. The flow of information was controlled completely by the Americans: a perfect PR-coup.

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And the war was a media war too. Fighting started at prime time, CNN reported life from Bagdad. This kind of reporting was really new, the control of information was the same procedure as in every war. Like Prince Albert the Americans wanted "No dead bodies". They were successful. The German commercial television RTL-plus said in news on 5.2.1991: "We are sorry, but we cannot show you pictures of casualties."

LET ME NOW ADDRESS THE PROBLEM OF THEORY; I.E. THE IDEAS OF CARL VON CLAUSEWITZ CONCERNING THE NATURE OF WAR.

The French Revolution had changed the character of warfare. War again as in former times became the concern of the people. War was no longer the business of specialists, of professional soldiers. Carl von Clausewitz, the Prussian General and military historian, was the first to recognize this. Clausewitz argued the the military success of Napoleon was mainly the result of the enthusiasm of the French people. War according to von Clausewitz is an act of violence in order to force the enemy to accept our will. But the central aspect of warfare is according to Clausewitz not physical force - it is morale. The war aim is the breaking of the morale of the enemy. The theory of war by Clausewitz takes into consideration the following three factors:

- the government which defines the war aims;
- the army, which is fighting;
- and the people.

Clausewitz already knew what Sir Arthur Ponsonby said in 1935: "The point is that propaganda is as much a weapon of war as a gun, and far more effective." And propaganda in wartimes means that informations which are not favourable for ones own cause are suppressed. During the war the lie becomes a kind of patriotic duty or even virtue.

Important for the theoretical foundation of censorship is the environment in which military actions are taking place. This environment is characterized by danger, highest physical strain and confusion. Clausewitz calls this "Friktion" which means that
all plans, developed during manoeuvre have to be changed in real war. All is simple in war, but the simple is difficult and nothing is certain. Camouflage and deceiving is normality. Most informations are insecure and very often wrong. Clausewitz argues that in war most news are false. Secrecy is most important. The enemy has to be deceived. Chancellor Bismarck said never is there so many lying as before an election, during a war and after hunting.

To summarize: The ideas of Clausewitz are relevant even during the Gulf-War. Imagine what would have happened, if the American public would have been confronted with the thousands of deads the Allied expected - but which due to successfully deceiving the Iraquis did not have had to be carried home in bags. Reporting the truth can be dangerous for the morale of the people. Lying and propaganda are important instruments of warfare. If journalists can be instrumentalized, can be manipulated in order to do propaganda then they are useful, but reporting the truth in most cases is dangerous for the successful achievement of war aims.

LET ME NOW TURN TO OTHER THEORETICAL REASONS FOR THE CENSORSHIP OF WAR REPORTING: THE NECESSITY OF LYING IS BASED IN THE PHENOMENON OF PARADOXICAL COMMUNICATION

According to Carl von Clausewitz lying and deceiving is a necessity in war. But this is not really a new idea: let me just mention Niccolo Machiavelli who in the Principe considered lying as a central instrument of policy. False pretence is most important for the machiavellist politician and the military.

It was the German sociologist Georg Simmel who argued in his Soziologie that during war the basis of social life is to be undermined. The enemy has to be confronted with situations he is not expecting. Normally people have expectations what other people will do. There exists a system of stable expectations of expectations, i.e. one can predict how the other person will react and what reaction the other person expects of me. Social interactions are based on reciprocal expectations.
Communication is interaction through messages. Communication means that information is passed from one person to another. In war-times communication with the enemy means that we try to pass desinformation to the enemy - and the enemy knows that it is our intention to desinform him. We have the situation of paradoxical communication. Decision making in war has the character of making paradox predictions: The higher the probability of a certain action, the lower the chance that the enemy will start this action. The lower the probability of an action, the higher the probability that the enemy will act in this way.\footnote{Watzlawick, P., Wie wirklich ist die Wirklichkeit? Wahn - Täuschung - Verstehen, München 1976, S. 132.}

The art of desinformation becomes of highest importance for survival in times of war. Successful desinformation means that the enemy has the impression that wrong information is credible. A famous example of successful desinformation is Operation Mincemeat, by which in 1943 the British Secret Service was able to deceive the Germans concerning the place of the Allied landing in the Mediterranean. By using a dead body, which was called Major Martin, it was possible to convince the Germans that the landing was intended not to take place in Sicily but in Greece or Sardinia.\footnote{Vgl. Montagu, E. E. S., The man who never was, London 1953. Commander Montagu war der Leiter der Operation Mincemeat. Masterman, J. C., Unternehmen Doppelspiel. Sir John Mastermans Geheimbericht an die Regierung seiner Majestät Der Kampf zwischen deutscher Spionage und britischer Abwehr im Zweiten Weltkrieg, Wien 1973, S. 156ff; zuerst 1972.} The basic idea was to convince the Germans by means of fake documents that Sicily was out of military reasons so obvious the place of a landing operation that the Allied would choose another place. It was possible to give the Germans the impression that the truth was a lie and that the lie was the truth. One of the fake documents contained a hint that the Germans should be deceived in the following way: out of reasons of camouflage the impression should be created that Sicily was the place choosen for the landing operation. Furthermore it was said that Husky, the code-word for the landing in Sicily was the code-word for the landing in Greece.

The logic of desinformation is the following: What does the enemy think, that I think, what he thinks etc. - whereby the aim is to play a wrong reality in his hands and to take care that the enemy will not find out until it is too late.\(^7\) I have to imagine myself in the position of the enemy and to take over his ways of thinking and perceiving. The normal rules of communication are turned upside down - it is the world of double cross.

During World War II the British secret service controlled the complete network of German spies in Britain. In order to be credible sometimes the British had to execute German spies dropped by parachute. Otherwise the other spies could not have been used for double crossing. The other reason for executions was the British public, which should be reassured that the Secret service was effective.

Let me sum up: Censorship in times of war is a necessity in order not to lose the advantage of surprise and not to inform the enemy about one's own weakness or strength and one's own intentions.

But there are some more reasons for the institutionalization of censorship:
- the morale of the soldiers;
- the morale of the population
- and last but not least the public opinion of the world.

Any state waging war has the task to create stories that justify and ennoble the cause. Whilst this stories are to be disseminated, stories telling the truth about the horrors of war from the soldiers point of view are to be suppressed. Ferdinand Tönnies argues in *Kritik der öffentlichen Meinung* (Criticism of public opinion) that public opinion in a country which is at war is of that kind, that people believe in the just cause of the war, which was forced upon the country by the enemy. And in order to stabilize this opinion the government stigmatizes the enemy as aggressor or as a non-human monster. President Bush argued: "Saddam tried to cast this conflict as a religious war, but it has nothing to do with religion per se. It has, on the other hand,

\(^7\) Vgl. Watzlawick, P. a.a.O.
everything to do with what religion embodies: good vs. evil, right vs. wrong."\(^8\)

It is of vital interest for the Supreme Command or the government to control public opinion. Winston Churchill justified deceptions against Hitler during World War II: "In times of war, truth is so precious, it must be attended by a bodyguard of lies."

In Germany during World War I the motto of the military PR was: "We cannot say all, but what we say is the truth." But one has to add, not the whole truth and in fact a lie. So the German defeat at the Marne which was most decisive for the war was never published correctly. And Kaiser Wilhelm at his birthday on 27.1. 1915 congratulated the journalists: "Compliment. Your articles are great. Full of patriotism. That's what the soldier needs."\(^9\)

Germany was no special case since in all countries during World War I there were institutions which were responsible for lying, i.e. the handling of the press. The author of the French war communiques, Jean de Pierrefou, was called the biggest liar of the whole country. One can say: there are normal lies; there are sacred lies and the biggest lies are official war communiques.

NOW LET ME GIVE SOME EXAMPLES FOR THE TRADITION OF PRESENTING THE ENEMY AS NONHUMAN

During the German-French war of 1870/71 the enemies vilified one another. The Germans were called such things as wolves, bulldogs, huns. The semi-official "Public" characterised the Germans as follows: "They slaughter the wounded, set ambulances on fire, they kill the children, ravish the women, murder the old men and burn the houses. Wolves, foxes, tigers an hyenas, they fatten themselves on our blood."\(^{10}\) It was claimed of Bismarck among other things that he had abducted a nun and had sired 50 children out of wedlock. The Prussian king "Wilhelm-Attila" was supposed to be in

\(^{10}\) Bauer, W., Die öffentliche Meinung in der Weltgeschichte, Potsdam 1930, 336f.
alcoholic delirium and so forth. All these attacks are mere preliminaries to the kind of propaganda used during World War I.

President Woodrow Wilson in 1917 appointed the "Committee on Public Information" under the journalist, George Creel, to conduct propaganda abroad and in the U.S.A. At least in some places the propaganda was able to whip up mass hysteria, as the following account by Raymond B. Fosdick illustrates. Fosdick recalls attending a great meeting in New England, held under the auspices of a Christian church: "A speaker demanded that the Kaiser, when captured, be boiled in oil, and the entire audience stood on chairs to scream its hysterical approval. This was the mood we were in. This was the kind of madness that had seized us. It was a holy crusade, a war to end war."

In Great Britain the "Department for Enemy Propaganda" was established in summer 1918 under Lord Northcliffe, the Director of Propaganda in Foreign Countries. British propaganda made the most of "German militarism" and characterised the German Kaiser as the "mad dog of Europe". Lord Northcliffe, whose credo was "my country, right or wrong", called the Germans "Huns" and the Kaiser "Super-Hun". In one and the same article in the Daily Mail the Kaiser was called a lunatic, a barbarian, a madman, a monster, a modern Judas and a criminal monarch. The word "Prussian" came to mean bloated, stupid and violent militancy. When World War I broke out Rudyard Kipling warned the Britons, "The Hun is at the gate". H.G. Wells spoke of "Frankenstein Germany" and attributed "intellectual inferiority" to the Germans. Tales of Germans cutting off the hands of children, boiling corpses to make soap, crucifying prisoners of war, and using priests as clappers in cathedral bells were nauseating yarns widely believed among both Allies and friendly neutrals.

These examples show: The stigmatization of the enemy has a long tradition. And the Americans built up Saddam Hussein as a kind of satanic enemy, as leader of an evil empire and the Iraquis were presented as clones of Hussein. We should remember that the USA in

preparation of their attack on Libya conducted a desinformation campaign against Chadafii. George Schultz, secretary of state, said: "Frankly, I don’t have any problems with a little psychological warfare against Qaddafii." 12

CENSORSHIP DURING GULF-WAR WAS AN ATTEMPT TO MANIPULATE WORLD PUBLIC OPINION

A first highpoint in efforts to manipulate the image of the enemy by using the mass media came with the Boer’s War when Great Britain due to their imperial cable policy was able completely to control the flow of information about this war. A Cabinet Paper dated 19.3.1891 argues that the worldwide control of the cables would be an enormous advantage for the United Kingdom. In October 1899 Great Britain censored all news which came from south and eastern Africa. It was impossible to receive news not censored by the British during the "Boer War". 13

In July 1900 Baron de Reuter wrote: "the censor’s action is nothing short of a scandal... the censor (undoubtedly acting under orders) suppresses everything which is not favourable. The way which the British public are being continuously misled and the honesty of the correspondents frustrated is a disgrace to the authorities." 14 Lord Kitchener called war correspondents "Drunken Swabs".

In World War I one had recognised meanwhile the great power potential the new mass media represented. It was no coincidence that one of the first British acts of war was to cut the German overseas cables. With that, Germany was cut off from the international flow of communications. American newspaper readers were in fact almost exclusively dependent on war information which either came from or was controlled by the Entente powers. News about the German invasion of Belgium came without exception from

14 Zitiert ebenda, p. X.
Germany's war opponents. It cannot be quantitatively ascertained what influence this one-sided information had on the U.S.A.'s later decision to declare war on the German Reich, but it certainly influenced public opinion.

The British secret service also had an America section headed by the then well known novelist, Sir Gilbert Parker. Parker spent the first months of the war analysing American newspapers and working out a plan to influence them. He compiled a mailing list of Americans likely to be able to sway public opinion. Under Parker's direction, British efforts to bring the United States into the war on the Allied side penetrated every phase of American life, from the pulpit to the classroom, from the factory to the office. It was one of the main propaganda efforts of history, and it was conducted so well and so secretly that little about it emerged until the eve of the Second World War.

The British were perfect in handling journalists. American correspondents, accompanied by diplomatic officers, were driven to the front. "They were then wined and dined at the headquarters chateau and quietly briefed about the British case." The influencing of the press was extraordinarily successful. An outstanding role was played in this by Frederick Palmer, who represented all three major American news agencies. He was the only non-British journalist in the original group accredited to the British Expeditionary Force in France. Palmer himself apparently recognised only after the war that he had made propaganda for the British. In "With my own eyes" he gave the opinion that the British propaganda "had much to do with bringing the United States into the war" and he admitted that he himself had written propaganda "in the illusion of the moment". The American press was fully under British control. It was possible to isolate Germany from practically the whole world, outside Europe.

SUMMARY

The conclusion to be drawn from my argument is that actual and objective eyewitwitness accounts are not wanted during times of war, since it is of vital interest to control the flow of information.
Paradoxical communication and secrecy requires absolute control over the flow of information. During the war the lie becomes a patriotic virtue. Rudyard Kipling said: "The first casualty when war comes is truth." Commencement of hostilities is the moment that truth is killed. Public relations in peacetime is "Doing right and talking about it." Public relations in wartime is lying and deceiving. And one shall not forget: "History is the propaganda of the victors".

Journalists are useful in the war only insofar as they can be instrumentalized to deceive the enemy; to strengthen the morale of the soldiers and of the people; to manipulate the world public opinion.