Western Armed Forces and the Mass Media in Historical Perspective

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STEPHEN BADSEY, MAR 8 2012

The Arab Spring uprisings, including the continuing revolts in Syria, have been accompanied by very large claims that they represent a new form of popular protest, driven and structured by the 21st century innovations of Web 2.0, including the use of smartphones (hand-held networked computers in all but name) and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Beliefs that these violent political events are best interpreted in terms of the social consequences of new communications technology have played an important part in military responses, both from target governments and from western powers in considering their options for intervention.

The importance of electronics and web technology for the future is also prevalent in current western military thinking, described by British Chief of the Defence Staff Sir David Richards as a 'horse and tank moment,' a transformation in warfare comparable to that wrought by the internal combustion engine in the early 20th century. This includes the current military (chiefly US) doctrine of 'information operations,' which combines electronic warfare, deception and propaganda. The exact nature of the relationship between information operations and the methods by which the armed forces interact with the domestic and international mass media, called 'public affairs' or 'media operations,' is a matter of continuing debate and controversy.

None of this comes as any surprise to scholars of war propaganda or contemporary military thought, other than that the innovations that we are now seeing have taken so long to appear in practice, over a decade after they were first identified as probable trends. But however distressing the images of death and destruction currently being relayed from Syria to the outside world through the media may be, one of the lessons of the last two decades has been that western governments have been very resistant to the impact on their own or international public opinion of this form of propaganda. There is also little evidence that media depictions of high casualties or domestic public opposition play a dominant part in western decisions to intervene, to escalate, or to withdraw from a conflict, unless these actions also fit with their wider policies and interests. In the Iraq War 2003-2011, both the British decision to participate in 2003 and the US 'Surge' decision to escalate troop levels in 2007 were made in defiance of significant domestic public and media opposition. Even the famous 'Black Hawk Down' episode in Mogadishu in 1993 played only an indirect part in the US decision to withdraw their troops from Somalia a year later.

Assessing the impact of any technological innovation on warfare in the short term is notoriously difficult, and each war has its own unique features. But the appearance of social media is probably less of a major change than simply one more development in the long history of propaganda. The parallels presently drawn between events in Syria and the western failure to intervene in the Rwandan massacre in 1994 are almost identical to those drawn by Kosovar Albanian lobbyists in 1999 prior to the Kosovo War, the first major war of the internet age.

In focussing on technological changes, governments and their armed forces miss these wider political and social issues. One of the first responses by the government of Hosni Mubarak to the Cairo uprising in January 2011 was a swift attempt to isolate Egypt from internet contact with the outside world. This was not only ineffectual, but also of secondary importance to the way that the revolt then spread. Presently a more complex and subtle international propaganda battle is being waged, largely through the exploitation of Web 2.0, in tandem with the physical destruction taking place within Syria.

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The pattern of the impact of new mass communications technology on warfare stretches back at least to the first part of the 19th century, with the emergence of mass circulation newspapers and the electric telegraph. This was also a time of major changes in the weaponry and structure of armed forces, both as aspects of mass society. Within the same long time-span, these changes have been facets of a highly complex, interactive, and iterative relationship, which also includes domestic politics and public opinion, the place of the mass media and the armed forces within society, the mass media as institutions and commercial businesses, military thought and innovation, and the theory and practice of the use of armed force in the international system.

Although the importance of public diplomacy and strategic communications – with information operations as their highly controversial military offshoot – is well recognised within international relations, the difficulties in reconciling particularly the approaches (and even the vocabulary) of media and communications studies with those of war studies and military thought has meant that any coherent theory of this relationship is still some distance in the future. Most writings interpret the military-media relationship in terms of their respective places in society, including their legal obligations. But in recent decades the US armed forces in particular have seen their relationship with the media in much narrower terms, as largely or entirely a facet of their own imperatives for accomplishing a specific military objective. This military perspective had a major impact on the US conduct of the Iraq War 2003-2011, including much that went very wrong in its early phases.

The military-media relationship itself long pre-dates the modern era, and for most of history consisted of propaganda for kings and warriors provided by paid chroniclers. Something of this tradition lasted into the 20th century, with generals at war taking favoured journalists into their headquarters, eventually to become their apologists and historians. Cases continue of successful officers and reporters establishing mutually beneficial working relationships, usually from very early in their respective careers. But the modern military-media relationship as it has developed from the middle 19th century onwards has been one of political power wielded by rival institutions within western nation states. Reporters on a battlefield have almost no power in relation to generals, but are supported at home by media institutions with considerable influence over the governments that hold the generals accountable, and are themselves accountable to public opinion. This difficult relationship has meant that since the middle 19th century the normal state of military-media relations has been one of negotiated co-operation between governments, armed forces and media institutions, all within a context of broad national consensus, reaching its institutional peak in the two world wars with the co-opting of the national media into the war effort.

Historically, the military response to each new change in mass media technology (from the electric telegraph and mass circulation newspapers, through photography, cinema newsreels, radio and television, to the internet) has been to identify it as a threat to the way that they conduct wars, and to respond in the manner described by sociologists as a 'moral panic'. A broader perspective on this issue is that a process has been underway, for almost two centuries now, of the increasing intrusion of mass domestic politics and public opinion into the realm of international diplomacy and its associated use of military force. Viewed positively, this development represents the challenge of democracy to the claims for an exclusive sphere of competence made by an elite professionalised military officer corps that itself came into existence only in the early 19th century. Just as this process of mass intrusion was much deplored in domestic politics by reactionaries in the later 19th century, and by professional diplomats in the first half of the 20th century, so they have been joined by professional soldiers, particularly from the 1980s onwards as direct satellite broadcasting technology led to claims – often repeated but now largely discredited – that television images were solely responsible for prompting military expeditionary deployments, often known as 'the CNN Effect'.

To this extent, the military perception that the growth in importance and diversity of the mass media since the second half of the 20th century has been a threat to their traditional ways of waging war is a correct one, although their responses have often been highly questionable. The US involvement in the Vietnam War 1961-1973 continues to be an important reference point, not only for the events of the war itself, but for the fictionalised rival interpretations of the media's impact on US domestic public opinion that became widely established in subsequent decades, with similarities to the German 'stab-in-the-back' myths of the First World War. Marshall McLuhan's famous claim that 'Vietnam was lost in the living rooms of America – not on the battlefields of Vietnam', although now supported only by a few scholars, remains a living truth for many military thinkers and pundits.

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The US armed forces have in fact enjoyed considerable advantages in their dealings with the mass media in wars since Vietnam. Largely, this is because their military institutional cohesion and focus allows them to develop and adhere to policies and doctrines in support of their own interests, whereas the news media remain highly diverse, and apparently institutionally incapable of defending themselves against increasingly sophisticated military manipulation. However, the issues raised by this military success are part of the much larger issue of the chronic failure of the US armed forces since the late 1950s to develop truly effective military strategies for their expeditionary wars. Like the earlier 20th century German armed forces on which they are largely modelled, they are expert at winning swift and high-tech battles, but struggle to win wars particularly when public opinion is an important factor. A focus on the technology of communications, and on manipulation of the media rather than an understanding of its place in society, lies close to the heart of this problem.

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