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The air-raids that never were, and the war that nobody won: government propaganda in conflict reporting, and how journalists should respond to it.

A submission for *Global Media and Communication*

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Abstract: During the bombing campaign against Libya in the spring of 2011, the fog of war enveloped not only the shifting frontlines of the battles between forces loyal to the then Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi, but also the more comfortable surroundings of British government ministries. A news story of an aborted air-raid reflected the huge importance which governments increasingly place upon getting their message across in the international media in time of conflict. Looking at that example from the conflict in Libya, and studying in detail others from Russia's 2008 war with Georgia, this article argues that journalists must correspondingly be increasingly aware of attempts by governments, and their hired public relations hands, to influence reporting.

Key words: journalism war conflict propaganda Libya Russia Georgia

The air-raids that never were, and the war that nobody won: how public relations tried to conquer journalism during the conflicts in Libya and South Ossetia.

A highly successful producer in BBC News once confided that he had never been tempted to seek a career in front of the camera for fear that, under the pressure of a live broadcast, he might just say the first thing which came into his head, or, aware that he had an expectant audience to satisfy, simply make something up. This dread of leaving a silent space – into which one might instead insert one's own version of events - seems to be a powerful motivating force for government communications in time of conflict, too. In March 2011, with NATO's bombing campaign against Libya newly underway, the Ministry of Defence in London announced that pilots of the Royal Air Force (RAF) had aborted an air raid because of the fear that it would cause civilian casualties. This was duly reported by the *Mail Online (*Mail Online 2011), *ITV News* (ITV News website, 2011), the BBC (BBC News website, 2011a), and others. A few days later, the British Foreign Secretary, William Hague, made reference to the reported incident when he announced the convening of a conference on Libya (Ministry of Defence, 2011). The context, again, was the lengths to which Britain and its allies were prepared to go to avoid civilian casualties in their attack on Libya. There is a wider context to consider, too. Britain had become involved in the campaign against Libya at a time when there was still a lingering sense that the British population had not been given the full facts about the reasons for invading Iraq in 2003[1]. A sense of a lack of progress, and continuing British military casualties, in Afghanistan had also appeared to undermine public support for that war (Comres website, 2009). There was perhaps bewilderment too that Britain was once again involved in an attack on a Muslim country, this time under the leadership of a Prime Minister, David Cameron, who, while in opposition in 2007 had said (with obvious reference to what was seen to have gone wrong in Iraq and Afghanistan), 'I think that if we have learnt anything over the last five years, it's that you cannot drop a fully formed democracy out of an aeroplane at 40,000 feet.' (Cameron, 2007). One can imagine that those in charge of communications policy at the Ministry of Defence, and indeed in government, sensed that they had a difficult task on their hands if they were to persuade people that British military intervention in (or, perhaps more accurately, in the skies over)

Libya was worthwhile. The care apparently taken to avoid civilian deaths could assist such an aim.

So could favourable coverage in the news media. As noted above, the story of the aborted raid was widely reported. 'Mission aborted on orders of SAS: RAF attack is halted after troops spot human shields' ran the headline in the *Mail Online*. Let us consider this incident in terms of what makes news. As a lecturer in both journalism and media and communications studies, this is a conversation I have almost every week with students. The old example of a headline, 'Man bites dog', is instructive here. 'Man bites dog' is news because it is unusual. Sometimes it is useful to consider the opposite to work out whether an event really constitutes a strong news story or not. In the case of the *Mail Online* headline, that would give something like 'RAF spot human shields and attack anyway'. Let us consider another definition of news - 'what a chap who doesn't care much about anything wants to read about' – the description offered by the agency journalist Corker in Evelyn Waugh's satirical novel *Scoop* (1938:66). Surely even the 'chap who doesn't care much about anything' might be roused to read what followed a headline about the RAF bombing human shields. In purely editorial terms – leaving aside the moral considerations of such an action - it is a much better story. It is unusual. It is unexpected. It is shocking. The story which the *Mail Online*, *ITV News*, and the BBC presented does not pass any test of what makes news in nearly the same way. One would hope that the RAF always strives to avoid civilian casualties; the fact that they did so on this occasion therefore does not seem so remarkable.

The additional factor here is that this story is, from a spin doctor's point of view, wonderfully difficult to verify. The *Mail* story suggested that the air strike had been called off because members of the SAS (the Special Air Service, i.e. British Special Forces) in Libya had signalled the presence of civilians in the area of the proposed attack. It is highly likely that there were SAS troops operating in Libya at the time, or that they had trusted sources who were passing them information. It is also completely impossible to check. The only way that such a claim could be established as fact would be if a reporter were to come across them by chance. This was highly unlikely, given the restrictions placed on international journalists in Libya at the time. So news organizations found themselves in a position where they could either be spun (something which they accept will happen from time to time, and, in the case of British military action, do not always resent), or scooped (something which they accept will happen from time to time, but which all journalists loathe). This time, they went for the

former option. The great skill in the presentation of this story was that the event which was supposed to have taken place was entirely believable - and impossible to disprove. Even if we assume everything was as the MoD story suggested, though, was it really a strong news story? I put my theory about the press release to a journalist from a major news organization, who was present at the briefing. 'Bang on the money,' was his response. 'The line about the aborted bomb attack was such blatant spin it was breath-taking.'

It was not just the British government, or those they would see take control of Libya, who were playing the game. Part of Colonel Gaddafi's strategy to hold on to power involved trying to curb and influence international journalists who had arrived in the country to cover the conflict that would eventually drive him from his capital in the face of a rebel advance. The BBC's Wyre Davies wrote of being taken to a hospital, apparently to see civilian casualties of a NATO bombardment. In fact, as a member of hospital staff disclosed to one of the journalists in the group which had been brought to the hospital, the two-year-old girl they were shown had been injured in a road accident (Davies, 2011). Davies' BBC colleague, Rupert Wingfield-Hayes, was taken on a similar wild goose chase, this time over hundreds of kilometres through the Libyan desert (Wingfield-Hayes, 2011). Wingfield-Hayes and his colleagues had been promised a trip to frontline positions held by fighters loyal to Colonel Gaddafi. What they saw was some destroyed buildings – although exactly how the destruction had been caused, and by whom, was far from clear – an oil terminal, and some people who were supposed to have been local residents. Local residents they may have been - but they also seem to have been ready to reappear at different locations to show their support for their leader. Wingfield-Hayes writes of one such group, 'They were holding up more pictures of Col Gaddafi and chanting. Several of the faces were strangely familiar. Then I realised they were exactly the same people we had seen back at the oil terminal.' (Wingfield-Hayes, 2011). Naturally, the entire ploy backfires as Wingfield-Hayes - and presumably his fellow journalists on the trip – discover that the only story they have to tell after a lengthy trip through the desert is that of the attempt to deceive them.

It may be that the British and Libyan governments were not alone in their attempts to confuse or mislead the news media during this conflict. Even experienced politicians, in established political systems, make errors which later they come to rue. The former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, wrote in his autobiography of his government's having introduced Freedom of Information legislation 'with care, but without foresight' (2010:127). So it is

perhaps understandable that, later in the conflict, Libya's National Transitional Council (NTC), taking their first steps in governing from a capital, Tripoli, which their forces were still seeking to overrun, should also make a communications blunder which could be said to have been committed 'without foresight'. Their mistake was to announce the capture of Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, son of the leader, Muammar Gaddafi, whom the NTC was striving to drive from power. Saif al-Islam Gaddafi - fluent in English, and holding a degree from the London School of Economics – had been very much the western-facing representative of his father's regime as it sought to crush those who would bring it to an end. His capture would be seen in uncertain times as a clear sign that Colonel Gaddafi's control over Libya was terminally weakened.

The lack of foresight exercised in this case was simple. The claim that Mr Gaddafi junior was in custody was not true. In reality, it would be another three months before Saif al-Islam Gaddafi was in the hands of his enemies, and by then, his father's grip on the country would have been ended decisively by his death. The fact that the false claim had been made only added extra force to his nocturnal *coup de théâtre* when, some hours later, he arrived at the hotel where the international news media were staying in order to show that he remained at liberty. This was not before many news organizations had reported the rebel claim, and not always with the proviso that they had not themselves checked it. The false news was given extra weight by the fact that the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Luis Moreno-Ocampo, was widely reported (Al Jazeera, 2011; The Telegraph, 2011) to have expressed the hope that Saif al-Islam would soon be in the Hague, where he could be put on trial. If, in making such an announcement, the NTC were guilty of a lack of foresight – failing, that is, to see how it would look when their claim turned out not to be true – they were hardly the only ones at fault. The journalists – from reporter to editor - who took part in the falsehood's unchecked advance should have done much better. The fact that they did not demonstrates that even in this age when it is more customary to celebrate the ever-growing number of news sources (Shirky, 2008) than to lament them, unless these new sources are used well, and not just used to repeat information which has not been verified, they are better not used at all. It also demonstrates that governments' ability to disseminate propaganda through the news media has not necessarily been diminished (and their desire to do so obviously has not) by the emergence of social media as a force in global newsgathering. The NTC, it is true, was a government neither in name nor in fact. Furthermore, it cannot be said with certainty whether this was an attempt at spin, or merely an example of the NTC itself being guilty of that

timeless journalist's sin of not letting the facts get in the way of a good story. Whatever the truth, many news organizations were themselves clearly guilty of not letting the facts get in the way of a good story. This announcement was accepted with an uncritical willingness that would have made the White House, Downing Street, or the Kremlin go green with envy. There are lessons here for government communications officers the world over but, more importantly, there is plenty for twenty-first century journalism to learn too if it is to serve its audiences well.

Manufacturing propaganda: change and continuity

Starting with Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent*, and Daniel Hallin's *The 'Uncensored War'* in the 1980s, the Vietnam war has loomed large in scholarship of journalism in wartime. Improved newsgathering and distribution for television gave this conflict an immediacy, in the United States at least, which was without precedent (Hallin, 1989:105; Sontag, 2003:18). At the heart of this debate lies the question of whether governments influence the media, or the media influence governments. Do the news media, in other words, counter propaganda, or promote it? Do they slavishly repeat official versions of policy, or actually help to shape them (Robinson, 2004)? In *Manufacturing Consent*, Herman and Chomsky analyse at length the extent to which the news media, especially television, may or may not have influenced the conduct and conclusion of the war in Vietnam. 'The standard critique of the media for having 'lost the war' indentifies television as the major culprit,' (1994: 199) is how they summarize an opinion which they then seek to demolish. On the contrary, they argue, the U.S. media 'were so closely wedded to U.S. government goals that they never sought to learn the facts' (1994:194). Herman and Chomsky are clear, though, in their belief that the media's role in the way that the war in Vietnam unfolded was highly significant. 'It would have been impossible to wage a brutal war against South Vietnam and the rest of Indochina, leaving a legacy of misery and destruction that may never be overcome, if the media had not rallied to the cause,' (1994:xv). This argument remains highly persuasive today, both for proponents and opponents of more recently military intervention. For what is the story of the aborted air-raid, if not part of a campaign to get the media to '(rally) to the cause'? This, after all, was a time when British public support for military action against Libya was neither universal, nor guaranteed. As the BBC website reported on the 3rd of April 2011, of a poll carried out for one of its

programmes, ‘Some 38% of people thought the UK and its allies were right to carry out air strikes, while 35% said it was the wrong decision.’ (BBC, 2011b).

In *The ‘Uncensored War’*, Daniel Hallin decides that, ‘The collapse of America’s “will” to fight in Vietnam resulted from a political process of which the media were only part’ (1989:213). In other words, the coverage reflected splits in public and political opinion – and did not cause them. Nevertheless, this ‘belief that the media, particularly television, were responsible for U.S. government failures’ (Herman and Chomsky, 1994: 170) proved so enduring that Susan Carruthers, writing of the 1991 Gulf War, found it still widely held. She notes, however, ‘As in previous wars, the presumed power of images to shatter morale may have been more important than their actual effect.’ (2000:142). That ‘presumed power’ is a considerable force, which seems to be getting stronger. For if Vietnam was the first television war, and the Iraq war of 1991 was the first war on live television (Thussu, 2003:118), we live now in a media environment which makes those two milestones seem very far back on the road of change. The events of the Arab uprisings of 2011, sometimes referred to as the ‘Facebook revolution’, involved media usage by activists, journalists, and governments, which could hardly even have been imagined at the time of the wars in Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s and Iraq in 1991. There is one constant throughout this period of change: the assumption that, in contemporary conflict, governments and non-governmental actors must expend a significant part of whatever resources they have to prosecute a war upon telling their story. This seems to be a conviction which is increasingly strongly held. As Shota Utiashvili of the Georgian Interior Ministry said in a BBC World Service documentary about his country’s public relations battle with Russia during their 2008 war, ‘In this century, and in a conflict where you have a huge power against a small state, I think that’s almost as important as the military battle,’ (BBC World Service: 2008). I discuss the media war in the Russia-Georgia conflict in greater detail below.

In addition to the works discussed above, journalists such as Thomson (1992:ix), and academics such as Carruthers (2011:7) have written about news management and propaganda in conflict journalism. It is of course not a new phenomenon, even in the rather clumsy form experienced by Rupert Wingfield-Hayes and his colleagues. As a correspondent based in Moscow in 2000, I was taken on an official trip to Chechnya (then the only legal way for the international news media to visit that region of southern Russia). The group of which I was a member was taken to see some villages in the north of the territory which, in

the words of the officials who accompanied us, had recently been 'liberated' from 'terrorists' (the Russian officials' description of the fighters who were seeking to end Moscow's control of Chechnya). Perhaps given the idea by western journalists' reporting of the wars in the former Yugoslavia, our minders seemed to have decided that burial sites were a good means of gaining the sympathy of reporters. We were taken to the village's football field. It had become a graveyard. A local woman was asked to tell us the stories of some of those who had been buried there. A photographer - noticing a larger mound, apparently containing more than one body- asked if it was the grave of a family. To the dismay of our minders, the woman explained that it was actually the grave of some bandits who had been killed by the militia, as the Russian police were then called. The case that the Chechen fighters had been killing large numbers of civilians was not made. The case that events and stories were being twisted or invented for reporters seemed proven.

New weapons in the propaganda war

As the first decade of this century went on, Russia - thanks to soaring oil and gas prices – became richer. The wealth restored a degree of self-confidence to a country whose self-belief had been battered by the chaotic decade which followed the collapse of communism. Vladimir Putin, a former KGB officer, was elected President in 2000. He came to symbolize this new confidence, and even assertiveness. As hosts in 2006 of the annual summit for the G8 group of rich countries, Russia even seemed to be trying to recapture some of the international standing which Moscow had enjoyed as the capital of a twentieth century superpower. There was one problem, though. Many of Mr Putin's critics[2] inside – and especially outside – Russia charged that this new stability and prosperity had been bought at the expense of the greater, if more unruly, political and press freedoms which had characterized the wild years of the 1990s. As paving stones were re-laid, and facades repainted, in St Petersburg as it prepared to host the summit, Russia also took the decision to try to renovate its international image. Russia's G8 organizing committee hired Ketchum, a public relations company based in the United States, to work on improving the kind of coverage the country received in the international press. Ketchum, in turn, engaged the services of GPlus, a Brussels-based consultancy company, to make Russia's case with western European media. As BBC correspondent in Moscow from 2006-2009, I had frequent dealings with them. Never were these more intense than during Russia's war with Georgia, over the breakaway Georgian territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, in the summer of

2008. The belligerents both employed western public relations companies to assist their war effort on the media front. Their task was not simply to shape audiences' – and governments' - understanding of what was happening. It was to establish as the truth a narrative which proved their paymasters were fighting a just war. The origins of the conflict go back to the break-up of the Soviet Union, two decades ago. Andrei Illarionov, until 2005 an advisor to the President of the Russian Federation, even argues (2009) that Russia had actively been seeking confrontation since 1999. There is no undisputed version of how this brief war actually started. Russia and Georgia continue to blame each other. Because the consultants' actual role was – in at least one case, which I discuss below – to try to persuade news organizations to report an event which had not, in fact, taken place, it is worth presenting a short, largely agreed, account of what happened. On the night of August 7-8 2008, after weeks of escalating tensions, heavy fighting broke out in South Ossetia, a separatist region of Georgia. During the days which followed, Russian troops drove the Georgian Army out of South Ossetia, then moved deeper into what was undisputed Georgian territory. A week later, President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, which then held the rotating presidency of the European Union, brokered a ceasefire. Russian troops remained in South Ossetia, and another separatist region, Abkhazia. Not long afterwards, Russia recognized both territories as independent states. Georgia remains determined that South Ossetia and Abkhazia should be returned to its control, and has expressed a willingness to offer the territories extensive autonomy should that happen, but there seems to be no possibility of that in the foreseeable future.

As the quotation from the Georgian interior Ministry official, Shota Utiashvili, above, makes clear, Georgia placed tremendous importance on the need to tell its version of the unfolding story in the international media. Russia was soon stung into doing the same. I had first worked as a journalist in Moscow in the summer of 1991, in the Soviet Union's dying days. The Russian authorities' attitude to the western media had shifted and changed under the influence of the vicissitudes of international relations, but never had there been such efficient and open cooperation as we western reporters in Moscow suddenly experienced in the early days of the war. Doors which, in normal times, were resolutely shut (it is worth recalling that this was only a year after Britain and Russia had expelled some of each other's diplomats in the wake of the 2006 murder in London of the former Russian secret policeman, Alexander Litvinenko) suddenly swung open. High-ranking officials were unexpectedly revealed as speakers of fluent English, and made available for our live broadcasts. One of those who returned from holiday to man the media front was Andrei Klimov, a member of the Russian

parliament for Vladimir Putin's United Russia party. In an interview for the programme which David Edmonds and I made in 2008 about the propaganda war, Mr Klimov articulated Russia's belief that Georgia had spent months planning a military and media offensive. 'Well for Russians it was unprepared war. Georgia hired some special agencies, paid them money since November last year. And they prepared for any variation of event: we, not. It was vacation period. It was empty city Moscow. We were not prepared for this. We prepared for the Olympic Games, but not for this conflict. And we lost at least five days for our reaction.' (BBC World Service, 2008). Even though Cornell and Starr suggest that 'the media coverage of the war during the crucial first few days largely reflected Russia's line,' (2009:3), this was not the way that officials in Moscow, like Mr Klimov, saw it.

It might be supposed that the longstanding support given to Georgia by the U.S. administration of George W. Bush (in 2006 Mr Bush said, 'I believe that NATO would benefit with Georgia being a member of NATO, and I think Georgia would benefit' (The White House website, 2006)) meant that, during the coverage, there was supportive coverage of Georgia in U.S. media. This may well be the case, and probably merits further research. It is also worth noting, as the report of Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (sometimes called the Tagliavini report, after Heidi Tagliavini, whom the Council of the European Union appointed to lead the mission which compiled it) said, that such support was not shared by all members. 'Georgia was not granted a Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the Bucharest meeting of April 2008 and this was a clear indication that, on the contrary, there are some basic political differences between NATO allies,' (Tagliavini Report, Volume II, p43). Nevertheless, while it might be difficult to conclude that there was a united NATO position reflected in the reporting of the conflict, there can be little doubt that the United States was supportive of Georgia. President Bush's accusing Russia during the conflict of 'bullying and intimidation,' (BBC News website, 2006) was a typical response to the attack on their ally.

Russia seemed to use this idea, expressed above by Mr Klimov, that Georgia had prepared a media offensive to suggest that they had prepared the military one, too: in other words, that they were the aggressor. This was the battlefield upon which this news war was to be fought. 'There's only one question that matters in the end, which is who started the war,' James Hunt, of Aspect - a corporate communications company based in Brussels - told me in an interview conducted in October 2008 for the BBC programme *The PR War for the Caucasus* (BBC

World Service 2008). (All subsequent quotations from James Hunt come from this interview). At the time of the war, Mr Hunt's company had a contract with the Georgian government. As the fighting continued, they were working hard for their money. 'I suppose at the height of the war on August 8th, 9th, we were probably sending out an email every hour, every 90 minutes,' Mr Hunt recalled. This email bombardment was the chosen tactic as they strove to implement a clear strategy: to shape the news reporting in a way that would show their clients in a favourable light. 'And what we've tried to do throughout the whole process is to demonstrate that Russia's actions, accumulated actions over weeks and months ahead of August 7th, combined with their evacuation of Tskhinvali[3] and their use then of the South Ossetian irregulars to shell Georgian villages on the nights of the 5th and 6th of August all add up to, in effect, a declaration of war by Russia on Georgia.' That, of course, is what any public relations agency is hired to do: promote the views and actions of their clients in as favourable a light as possible. Journalists may resist or resent such attempts, but they are a fact of a reporter's life. If, however, we now live in a world where the media war is 'almost as important as the military battle', journalists will have to be on their guard to an even greater extent.

As the war between Russia and Georgia continued, it soon became clear that Russia's overwhelming numbers and firepower would ensure victory. The question was whether, for Russia, driving the Georgian Army out of South Ossetia would constitute victory, or whether Moscow might try to remove from office President Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia, with whom they had long had a confrontational, and ill-tempered, relationship. The fate of the city of Gori lay at the heart of this. For Gori, which prior to the conflict had been famous principally as the birthplace of the 20th century Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, lay beyond the administrative border which separated South Ossetia from the rest of Georgia. Were Russian troops to advance on, or occupy, Gori it would be seen as a move beyond their stated objective of protecting the civilian population of South Ossetia. From a Georgian point of view, any such assault would help to make the case that Russia was the aggressor in the conflict. As so frequently in conflict journalism, especially in this case when the background to the conflict had barely been reported, the bigger picture was unclear; the situation in the war zone itself difficult to determine. The public relations people sensed an opportunity. 'You do get confused information, there's no two ways about that,' James Hunt noted afterwards. 'We here in Brussels put a lot of pressure on your organization, the BBC, and on CNN to say you should change the tickers on your screen because the Russians have taken

Gori.' This pressure, though, was applied before the Russians had taken Gori. To report that they had, at the time when Georgia's public relations advisers wanted to make that the story, would have been to report what had not happened. The implication is clear. The PR consultants were moving from trying to shape the way that events were reported, to trying to create events so that they could be reported. It was as if the capture of Gori had been planned by Georgia and its consultants as a news story which would show them in a good light. When it did not happen as planned, they exploited the confusion of conflict to run with it anyway.

Coming across Sam Gardiner's *Truth from these podia* (2003), in Nick Davies' *Flat Earth News* (2008), I was struck by the similarities between what my research was uncovering, and what Gardiner, a retired colonel in the United States Air Force, had written about the reporting of the fall of Basra in during the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Gardiner analyses the way in which the news of the city's capture by invading allied troops was established as a media factoid long before it actually took place. In an interview conducted by email, I asked Gardiner if he saw the same process at work in the case of the Russian Army's advance on Gori. 'The comparison is very valid,' Gardiner replied. 'The fall of the first two cities in Iraq had been planned way in advance to be one of the first positive stories of the invasion. They got carried away telling the story.' (Email response to questions from the author, 4 November 2010). Georgia's PR machine got carried away, as had that of the United States in Iraq, and ended up trying to 'put pressure' on news organizations to report things which they, the public relations consultants, did not know to be true, and possibly knew to be untrue. In a sense, of course, this is nothing new. Also writing of the reporting of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and putting it in its historical context, Des Freedman says, 'producing propaganda to win consent and maintain support for war are, by now, long-established (and problematic) features of military conflict.' (2004:63). Writing specifically about the post-September 11th era, Robin Brown has identified the techniques which characterize government communications in wartime as follows, 'In waging the war on terrorism, the United States has made use of three different paradigms of communications as a tool of influence: military concepts of information warfare, foreign policy concepts of public diplomacy, and approaches to media management drawn from domestic politics.' (2003:90). In the period which followed the United States' declaration of a 'war on terror', David Miller sees 'serious investment in an extensive machinery of propaganda'. (2003:80). In another sense, because of the scale and would-be subtlety with which this particular media conflict was conducted,

the Russian-Georgian war represented a new theatre for the deployment of such techniques, adapted, like military tactics and materiel, to local conditions.

As it sought to recapture some of the power which had been extinguished with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow found itself emerging into a world in which not only had international relations moved on - the media landscape had changed, too. Chief among the changes was the dominance which English language, 24 hour, television news networks - such as CNN International and BBC World (now BBC World News) - now exercised. The extent of their power was perhaps confirmed by the establishment of imitators, which, even though they were not based in English-speaking countries, broadcast in English. *Al Jazeera English* and *France 24* were just two of the new arrivals. Moscow had itself recognized the new dominance of this format in the establishment of *Russia Today*, now more commonly known as *RT*. Like an army from the era of pitched battles trying to use the terrain to its advantage, Georgia seemed to have chosen to fight on a field where it felt it had the upper hand – at least, judging from Mr Klimov's remarks, above, that is the way that it looked to Russia. Angus Roxburgh is a former BBC correspondent who, at the time of the Russia-Georgia war, was working as a consultant for GPlus, the agency which was advising the Russian government. He remembers a sense that Russia was trying to catch up; struggling against a feeling that it was being left behind, overwhelmed, while Georgia's version of events dominated global news broadcasts. 'They were definitely appalled at the idea that they were being blamed for the whole thing,' Mr Roxburgh said later (interview with the author, London, September 2010. Subsequent quotations are also taken from this interview), 'and so they felt vindicated when the Tagliavini report came out that at least sort of equally shared the blame, certainly said that the Georgians had started it on the night, whatever the provocations had been. They really didn't like the idea that the Georgians were getting the better of them on that, and they felt they were.' Even though the western, English-speaking world, was not directly involved in the conflict, it had provided the model for the media battle which accompanied it. Georgia, with its suggestion that this was 'almost as important as the military battle', seems to have understood this far better than Russia, and prepared for it accordingly. Certainly, that is how it seemed to Angus Roxburgh. He remembers a Kremlin media team and its advisors on the defensive as a result of the extensive appearances the Georgian President was making on global television news channels, appearances in which he made his country's case in fluent English. 'I think they got spooked because Saakashvili was doing so well. He was everywhere, and the initial reporting tended to spin it in the Georgian

way.' The fact that Mr Saakashvili was given so much air time does seem to challenge the suggestion, advanced by Cornell and Starr, and cited above, that Russia somehow benefitted from more favourable reporting in the early stages of the war. From the very beginning of his work as a media advisor to the Russian authorities, Mr Roxburgh seems to have had a sense that Russia felt obliged to take part in a game the rules of which it found baffling.

They didn't really understand it. We taught them what we could, but they came into it with strange ideas about how the western press worked. I think they felt that everybody else did do it, that all other governments had PR people working for them as well – but didn't completely understand it.

Any notion that taking part in this game was helping Russia seemed to have started to disappear not very long after the end of the conflict. In the autumn of that year, a colleague in the BBC Moscow bureau, who had telephoned the Ministry of Defence Press office in Moscow to seek permission to attend a news conference about the autumn call-up (the overwhelming majority of Russian soldiers are conscripts) was refused by a surly official on the grounds that he BBC always told lies.

While the war over South Ossetia ended in a clear military victory for Russia, the diplomatic outcome was less obvious. Russia's recognition of South Ossetia, and another separatist region of Georgia, Abkhazia, as independent states was followed by few. The result of the media war was also less obvious. Neither of the Brussels based agencies (none of whose consultants, it is perhaps needless to add, had been to South Ossetia – apparently such knowledge and experience would add nothing to one's ability to understand the conflict) was willing to claim victory in the PR war. GPlus, indeed, were unwilling even to give an interview. While I was able to talk to sources close to the media campaign upon which the company worked for the Russian authorities, the only person who was willing to speak publicly was Angus Roxburgh, who, when I interviewed him in September 2010, had left GPlus. On the question of who won, of course, it might be suggested that were a PR agency publicly to claim victory, it would appear arrogant and conceited, and would therefore be bad public relations.

Conclusion: how journalism should respond

Reading some of the reporting in 2011 of the Arab Spring (see, for example, Kirkpatrick and Sanger, 2011) one might conclude that the opportunities offered by social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter mean that attempts of governments and their PR consultants to shape the news agenda will soon be banished to history. I would argue that the example with which I began this article – the Ministry of Defence press release, suggests that is not the case. Instead, I would endorse the conclusion of Robinson, Goddard, Parry and others in *Pockets of resistance* (2010). 'Even if, over time, new communication technologies have increased the potential power of news media outlets, increasingly professional government media-management techniques may have been effective in countering these developments.' (2010:29). There has not even been a need always for these media-management techniques always to be 'increasingly professional'. The decision by the Libyan authorities, as they faced rebellion, simply to restrict access to the internet, means that the revolution in that country has not been identified with social networking sites as have those in other countries in the Arab Spring. The Syrian government's decision largely to ban international reporters from their country - and to keep most of those who were permitted entry under close watch – demonstrates that, even in the age of mobile, digital, media devices and social networking sites, such bans can still have an effect, even if they are not as complete as once they might have been. The fact that the achievement of James Harkin (2011) and others – like the *Sunday Times'* Marie Colvin, who was killed in Homs in February 2012 - who did manage to report relatively freely from Syria was so rightly celebrated in journalistic circles shows its rarity, and its value. Nevertheless, crudely, as in Syria or Libya, or with more cunning, as in Russia and Georgia, governments seem increasingly to share the view expressed by the Georgian government official, Shota Utiashvili, above, that gaining favourable coverage in wartime is 'almost as important as the military battle'. Journalism needs to respond by making rigorous use of the unique perspective which reporters often have, especially in time of conflict. I mentioned above that none of the consultants involved in spinning this war had visited South Ossetia. Many of the correspondents who covered it, on the other hand, had had the opportunity to report both from those parts of Georgia under government control, and one or both of the separatist regions. This was an opportunity also denied to policy makers. Journalists, in other words, were among those who best understood the overall situation. No wonder policy makers sometimes set such store by influencing them, and their audiences. It was also Piers Robinson who wrote of *The CNN effect* (2002). Today, we need to be aware of the CNM (Conflict News Management) effect: increasingly determined attempts by

governments, and the public relations executives whom they hire, to complicate our understanding as citizens of wars which are waged in our name.

Note: I also analyse some of the reporting of the Libya conflict in my chapter *The fog of propaganda: attempts to influence the reporting of the Arab Spring, and how journalists should see through it* in Mirage in the Desert: Reporting the Arab Spring (Keeble, R. and Mair J. (eds)) (October 2011) (Bury St. Edmunds, Arima). A version of the chapter was also published in the *British Journalism Review* (Volume 22, number 4, 2011). I presented some of my work on the Russia-Georgia war in a paper entitled *Marching on the news media: how PR tried to conquer journalism during the Russia-Georgia conflict of 2008* at the *What makes good journalism?* conference at the University of Westminster in June 2011. The role of public relations agencies in the reporting of that war is an issue I address in greater detail in my book *Reporting Conflict* (2012) (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan).

Notes

[1] The non-discovery of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction aside, on the 17th of January 2011, the inquiry launched by the British government to identify lessons that could be learned from the Iraq war had published testimony from the then Attorney General, Lord Goldsmith. In the testimony, Lord Goldsmith disagreed with the suggestion that Tony Blair's words in the House of Commons, and in an interview with the BBC's *Newsnight* programme, had been compatible with the advice that he, Lord Goldsmith, had given in his capacity as the British government's senior lawyer (Iraq inquiry website, 2011).

[2] For example the journalist, Anna Politkovskaya, and the former world chess champion, turned political activist, Garry Kasparov.

[3] The main town in South Ossetia.

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