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The fog of propaganda: Attempts to influence the reporting of the “Arab Spring” and how journalists should see through them

James Rodgers, a former BBC Foreign Correspondent turned “hackademic”, examines governments’ attempts to manage the media. In response, he suggests journalists need to adopt rigorous research and fact-checking, and develop wide networks of sources in order to break through the fog of propaganda

After a helicopter attack on a village in Francis Ford Coppola’s film *Apocalypse Now*, set during the Vietnam War, the US troops who carried out the assault try to convince the village’s terrified inhabitants that they are there to help them. A television news director, played by Coppola himself, urges the soldiers to act naturally, despite the presence of the camera crew. It is perhaps fitting that the great filmmaker is included in this scene, for it is the Vietnam War – a conflict far from the homes of the American soldiers who fought it, and yet which bitterly divided political opinions on their doorsteps – which still echoes through the American wars, and the journalism scholarship, which came later.

Beginning with the work of Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, and Daniel Hallin, in the 1980s, that scholarship has often focused on the extent to which the news media are influenced by political pressure, and the extent to which the news media have influenced political elites in their decision making. Coppola’s television director and his crew are part of an attempt to make the war seem worthwhile, noble even, to audiences far away who are paying for it in tax dollars, and in some cases, with the blood of their sons. Increasingly, governments seem convinced that in wartime media campaigns are not only a wise, but an indispensable, use of their resources. Government propaganda in wartime is nothing new, of course – but the “Arab Spring” has shown us that it continues, and thrives. There are challenges, and lessons, here for journalism. New technology, so often seen as a crucial factor in the way the “Arab Spring” unfolded, and allowed people to challenge their rulers, will not alone shine brightly enough to drive away the fog of propaganda, and allow audiences to see clearly.

Attempts at News Management: The Fairly Subtle, and the Faintly Ridiculous

In March 2011, with the Nato bombing campaign in Libya newly underway, the Ministry of Defence in London put out a story that an air strike on targets in Tripoli had been aborted. The reason: to avoid civilian casualties. The story was duly reported by the Mail Online,¹ ITV News,² the BBC,³ and others. Announcing some days later the convening of a conference on Libya, the British Foreign Secretary, William Hague, made reference to it, again in the context of the length to which the UK and its allies were prepared to go to avoid civilian deaths.⁴

Consider this as a news story in the light of the old saying about “man bites dog” being news. As every trainee reporter or first year journalism undergraduate knows, “man bites dog” is a story precisely because it is out of the ordinary. Sometimes, when weighing up the strength of a story, it can be instructive to consider whether the opposite would be newsworthy. The headline in the Mail Online was: “Mission aborted on orders of SAS: RAF attack is halted after troops spot human shields.” The headline of the opposite story would be something like: “RAF attack goes ahead despite human shields.”

By any normal news values – leaving aside humanitarian considerations – the second is a much better story. It is much more unusual. It is shocking. One would hope that the RAF always strives to avoid civilian casualties – therefore, the extent to which such an announcement can really be considered newsworthy is highly questionable. In other words, is it really a story? As the press announcement of a government trying to convince an electorate weary of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that this new offensive in Libya was worthwhile, it clearly served its purpose. It was also, from the perspective of any officials who were seeking to influence and shape the news agenda, delightfully difficult to verify.

So was the presence of the SAS⁵ “spotters” to which the Mail Online article referred. This story of the SAS saving civilian lives may well have been true. It is perfectly reasonable to believe that British Special Forces, or their agents, were in Tripoli to assist the targeting of attacks. It is also perfectly impossible for a journalist to check, unless they suddenly came across the SAS in a Tripoli street (highly unlikely, given the restrictions under which international journalists were placed in Libya then). That angle too needed to be considered in the context of the time.

Up to that point in the military campaign against Colonel Gaddafi, the SAS had not had a particularly good press. Their most prominent appearance in the news had been with the word “fiasco” attached to their august initials. “Fiasco” was the conclusion to the rather bizarre tale of SAS personnel landing in Libya, apparently unannounced, in the middle of the night and being “captured by a group of farmers. This James Bond-style story did not end well for those on Her Majesty’s Secret Service. They were detained, and then rather shamefully sent back whence they came by those they had come to help. As James Kirkup wrote in the *Daily Telegraph*,⁶ the incident was an “embarrassing failure”, which left the Foreign Secretary, “drawing laughter from MPs” when he explained to parliament that it “was caused by a ‘serious misunderstanding’ about their mission”. One wonders if the Ministry of Defence communications team, preparing the press release about the raid being aborted, sensed a simultaneous opportunity to polish the public image of Special Forces whose activities had so recently “drawn laughter”. If so, they succeeded. The SAS’s cool-headed and compassionate role in the story of the aborted raid featured in many accounts.

The fault lies not with government press officers. They cannot be blamed for doing their job, which is to present military personnel, their political masters, and the activities of both, in a favourable light. The fact that they do so by means of a story which is almost impossible to disprove just makes their tactics all the more effective. It is the job of the journalist to try to

see through this (unless, as in some cases, a flag-waving editorial line discourages such enquiry). Sometimes, as in the next example I want to consider, they do so very successfully. Their task is not always terribly difficult. In June 2011, the BBC's Wyre Davies, who was covering the conflict in Libya, reported his experience of being taken by Libyan government minders to see civilians apparently injured in NATO air strikes.⁷ It turned out to be nothing of the sort. Perhaps understanding that the suffering of children in wartime can make particularly memorable and heartbreaking television footage, the minders encouraged the international reporters, including Davies, to tell the story of an infant girl, Hanin, who, the Libyan officials said, had been injured in by NATO bombing.

This, of course, was impossible to verify, but reasonable to assume. It was highly likely that there had been civilian casualties as a result of Nato's attacks on Libya. The Libyan authorities seem to have been poorly stage managers, though. As Davies reported: "A member of the hospital staff passed a scrap of paper to the press. It was a hand-written note, in English, saying the girl was, in fact, hurt in a car accident. The hospital scene, it would appear, was a complete sham." The whole effect of clumsy propaganda was subsequently reinforced when a man who had been presented in the hospital as Hanin's uncle reappeared at the site of another supposed air strike. Challenged by reporters, who recognised him from his earlier role, he was unmasked as a Libyan government employee.

This kind of clumsiness is not confined to the Libyans. Reporting for the BBC from Chechnya in 2000, I remember being taken to a village recently "liberated", in the words of our Russian government minders, from rebel control. The village's football field had become a cemetery. A local woman was brought forward to tell the international journalists who had come on the organised trip what had happened. Our minders had assured us that we would hear stories of civilians killed by Chechen fighters. One of the mounds of earth was noticeably larger than the rest. "Was it the grave of a family?" a photographer asked.

Apparently, it was not. The woman, to the frustration of our minders, explained that it was the burial place of some bandits killed by the militia, as the Russian police were then called.

Governments, Public Relations, and Propaganda

As the first decade of this century went on, revenues from rising international energy prices made the Russian government richer. They seem to have become wiser, too. Perhaps realising that they were not seeing their story told in the international media in the way they wanted, they hired western PR agencies to help them. As BBC Moscow correspondent from 2006-2009, I frequently dealt with one such company, GPlus Europe, on stories ranging from the 2006 G8 Summit in St Petersburg, to the 2008 war with Georgia. In that conflict, Georgia, whose government since 2003 has been keen to break free from the residual Russian influence which remained after the collapse of Communism, also used Western PR consultants.

While Russian and Georgian soldiers killed and died on the battlefield in the dusty heat of a Caucasus summer, the two squadrons of spin doctors confronted each other over the international airwaves, bombarding journalists around the world with emails and text messages. Countless other countries, including some of those whose rulers came unstuck in the Arab Spring, have also sought professional help to develop their media strategies. Global news channels such as BBC World News, CNN, Al Jazeera, and their imitators, have created new, international, audiences. They have also created a new propaganda battleground where consultants and public relations executives fight to get their clients' versions of events accepted. It has become such a major industry that, in 2010, the *Guardian* declared London "world capital of reputation laundering".⁸

"It has been increasing for some time now, and I believe it's still on the increase," a source with long-term experience of the industry said of sometimes unsavoury governments' attempts to improve their image by using the services of Western public relations consultants.

“We had an approach a couple of weeks ago from a country that has huge reputational problems, that was waving a multi-million dollar contract, and we turned them down. These were not people we would want to represent,” the source explained during a conversation in July 2011, before adding: “They’ll find someone in London.”

That likelihood is worrying for journalism – especially at a time when both journalists and public relations executives know that reporters’ time is increasingly short. In an article for the National Union of Journalists’ magazine, the *Journalist*, in 2011, Stefan Stern, a former writer for the *Financial Times*, reflected on his new job with the public relations company, Edelman. He addressed journalists’ traditional idea of public relations as the “dark side”. He shares his first impressions of his new workplace. “Not very dark. In fact, this seemed to be a surprisingly sunny (and well-resourced) world.”⁹ The phrase “well-resourced” brings to mind Nick Davies’ point in *Flat Earth News* about the greater number of people now employed in PR compared to in journalism.¹⁰

If corrupt regimes are able to “find someone in London” to launder their reputation, there are potentially serious consequences for the kind of reporting our audiences will receive. And while it is true that digital technology has made a massive contribution to the way the events of the “Arab Spring” have been communicated to listeners, viewers, and readers around the world, those events have also demonstrated its limits, and potential pitfalls. The case of Amina, the Syrian lesbian blogger who was not¹¹ (as discussed elsewhere in this volume by Daniel Bennett) demonstrated both that online material can be highly misleading, and that social networking sites (in this case, National Public Radio’s Andy Carvin and his followers on Twitter) can help to expose the deception.

Twitter and Facebook themselves, however, will not be enough to enable journalists and their audiences to see through the fog of propaganda which governments and their hired assistants summon up with the sorcery of their communications strategies. As Piers Robinson and his

co-authors write in *Pockets of Resistance*, their study of British news media and the reporting of the 2003 invasion of Iraq: “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.”¹²

How Can Journalists Respond?

What can journalists do to try to guard against attempts, crude or clever, to influence them? The answer is the best of the old, and the best of the new. By the best of the old, I mean the need to check sources, and check information, as far as possible. That involves not only recognising the enduring value of eyewitness reporting, but also placing renewed emphasis on standing stories up properly. This is where the best of the new comes in. As Andy Carvin has demonstrated with his extensive network of followers on Twitter, new technology does offer new possibilities. Carvin has facilitated extensive coverage of the Arab Spring without being based in the region. Only by combining these two approaches – rigorous research and fact-checking, and networks of sources – can journalists hope to generate enough bright rays to burn off the fog of propaganda.

Note on the author

James Rodgers is Senior Lecturer in International Journalism at London Metropolitan University. He spent twenty years as a journalist: five for Reuters Television, and fifteen for the BBC. For most of his BBC career (1995-2010) he was a foreign correspondent, completing postings in Moscow, Gaza, and Brussels, as well as numerous other assignments. His areas of specialist knowledge as a journalist are Russia and the former Soviet Union, and the Gaza Strip, where, as the BBC’s correspondent from 2002-2004, he was the only international journalist permanently based in the territory. He covered all the major stories of

post-Soviet Russia, including the election in 1991 of Boris Yeltsin, the breakup of the USSR later that year, the two wars in Chechnya, the presidency of Vladimir Putin, and Russia's war with Georgia in 2008. While based in Gaza, he also reported from Israel and the West Bank. In 2001, he was in New York and Washington to cover the aftermath of the attacks of September 11th. He reported for the BBC from Baghdad and Tikrit at the time of Saddam Hussein's capture in December 2003. His book, *Reporting Conflict*, is due to be published by Palgrave MacMillan in 2012.

Notes

¹ The Mail Online (2011) Mission aborted on orders of SAS: RAF attack is halted after troops spot human shields. Available online at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1368626/Libya-RAF-abort-attack-SAS-spot-Gaddafi-using-human-shields.html>, accessed on 13 July 2011

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³ BBC News (2011) RAF Tornados abort mission in Libya. Available online at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-12803217>, accessed on 26 July 2011

⁴ The Ministry of Defence (2011) Foreign Secretary announces London conference on Libya. Available online at <http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/DefenceNews/DefencePolicyAndBusiness/ForeignSecretaryAnnouncesLondonConferenceOnLibya.htm>, accessed on 13 July 2011

⁵ Special Air Service – British special forces

⁶ Kirkup, James (2011) Libya: Whitehall blame game begins over SAS fiasco, *Daily Telegraph*. Available online at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/8366880/Libya-Whitehall-blame-game-begins-over-SAS-fiasco.html>, accessed on 13 July 2011

⁷ Davies, Wyre (2011) Libya: Curious incident of the child "air raid victim". Available online at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13676525>, accessed on 14 July 2011

⁸ Booth, Robert (2010) PR firms make London world capital of reputation laundering, *Guardian*, 3 August. Available online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/aug/03/london-public-relations-reputation-laundering?INTCMP=SRCH>, accessed on 14 July 2011

⁹ Stern, Stefan (2011) Not so much dark but surprisingly sunny, *Journalist*, April/ May p. 15

¹⁰ Davies, Nick (2009) *Flat Earth News: An Award-Winning Reporter Exposes Falsehood, Distortion, and Propaganda in the Global Media*, London: Vintage p. 85

¹¹ McCrum, Robert (2011) Lessons learned from A Gay Girl in Damascus, *Guardian*. Available online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2011/jun/15/lessons-learned-gay-girl-damascus?INTCMP=SRCH>, accessed on 25 June 2011

¹² Robinson, Piers; Goddard, Peter; Parry, Katy; Murray, Craig with Taylor, Philip M. (2010). *Pockets of Resistance: British News Media, War, and Theory in the 2003 Invasion of Iraq*, Manchester: Manchester University Press p. 29