

WARTIME provides electrifying, though tragic, soundbites and footage. As a consequence, the readership, viewership and listenership of the electronic and print media increase considerably during times of war. However, it can safely be contended that wartime is bad news for journalism.

As we all know, during wars the governments come closest to disaster. That's why they resort to all kinds of tactics to force their views across, via the media. During times of war it becomes routine for the media — all media — to contend with doses of lies, deception and cover-up.

It's not surprising then to see the BBC and British governments clash over Suez, Falklands, Gulf and even Kosovo wars. All wars — and not just those fought by the British — are testament to the games governments, including western democratic ones, play.

Several arguments have been put forth in favour of the imposition of special curbs and controls during wartime. The thrust of these arguments is this: It's essential for the carrying out of a country's foreign and defence policies to limit the media's access to war operations, in national interest, thereby impeding the propaganda activities of the enemy.

Another interesting argument, deployed from time to time, points out that since the undemocratic governments

Must first

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don't have to contend with free press at home, democratic governments locked in wars with them should be allowed to place special controls on their media.

A distinction has been made in the argument between democratic and undemocratic governments. So does it imply that if two democratic governments were pitted against each other, there wouldn't be a need to control the media's access to pertinent information? However, as we will discuss below, even when war is waged within the boundaries of a democratic government, the truth is likely to be among the first sufferers.

Meanwhile, a counter-argument rejecting official controls on the media goes something like this: How in a democratic society can the public hold its political and military leaders accountable for their actions if there's no prompt and full reporting by the independent media that have access to unofficial as well as official sources of information about military actions. (From

Is truth be the war casualty?

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INQUIRY

Reporters Under Fire: US Media Coverage of Conflicts in Lebanon and Central America.

Now, let's try and analyze the important wars, from Vietnam onwards, in which the British media were involved in a big enough way. Let's talk of restrictions imposed on the media during wartime and try to draw some lessons. Let's also try and gather evidence showing war has not always succeeded in defeating truth. A paucity of such evidence would suggest that the doyen of journalists and scholars — Phillip Knightley — was right in saying that whenever war breaks out, truth becomes the first casualty.

The Vietnam War: The Vietnam War was a watershed so far as media coverage is concerned. During it, no matter how hard the US government and its military tried to prevent the journalists from unearthing the truth, they somehow managed to uncover a significant part of it.

It was due to the media coverage of this war that the US military started holding negative view of journalists. According to the book *Newsmen and National Defence: Is Conflict Inevitable*, the US military felt that the conduct of war had been snatched from their hands and instead placed firmly in those of the television journalists.

In the war's initial years, the journalists didn't pay much attention to it. So, even during the crucial period when the

reporters on board, went up the editorial ladder and started pressuring the editors to "get on board" (*The First Casualty*). As a result, the reporters faced considerable difficulty in getting their stories published in their own newspapers.

Mr Knightley has also tried to blow away the myth that reporters were doing their best to uncover the truth.

Corruption was not the only problem which largely went unreported. Cases of torture and other excesses at the hands of US troops also largely went unmentioned until the story of the My Lai massacre was broken by a US-based alert freelance correspondent called Seymour Hersh. He wrote the story only because he was capable of being shocked at US excesses and atrocities. The war reporters had simply become immune to these (*The First Casualty*).

All of the above seems to suggest that the American reporters were doing a lousy job in Vietnam. But it's also true that some of them rose to the occasion in a big enough way.

We had the glowing example of Charles Mohr and Merton Perry who resigned when *Time* magazine didn't carry their investigative story about, among other issues, corruption among reporters. The magazine had actually asked one of its staff to write a piece that ultimately replaced the one by Mohr and Perry. When the two were refused even to rebut the story that had replaced theirs, they both

and Arabs broke out, a shortened version of the interview was shown that was run alongside another one — that of Abba Eban, who was by no means an Arab sympathiser.

The step had been taken to balance Nasser's interview, Mr Mayhew was told. Mayhew, in his book *Publish it not: The Middle East Cover-up*, wrote about the episode: "(The interviews) were a breach of faith, since they disregarded the undertakings we (BBC) had given to Nasser."

The Falklands War: The war between Argentina and Britain, in 1982, was a particularly difficult one to cover. Both, the access to the war zone and means of communication, were out of the news-men's reach.

As in every war, the news-men had three locations to report from. These were: the war zone, in the middle of an ocean; the Argentine capital, and; offices of UK's Ministry of Defence (MoD), in London. For the British journalists, the Argentine capital was a suspect location in terms of the quality of information. So this option was ruled out. This left the war zone and the MoD's offices in London as viable options.

Initially, there were suggestions that the journalists should make do with only the official communiques to be released each day. Later on, however, the British media decided to hop on to the MoD's craft to be able to report from the war zone. (Phillip Knightley's *The First Casualty*).

things up in secrecy when war breaks out. In the case of this war, hostilities have been taking place well within the boundaries of a democratic government and the public have every right to be informed of the way war is prosecuted. Yet, misinformation and disinformation thrive.

Close scrutiny of the situation in conflict-torn Ireland shows that the powerful, be they in the government or media, are reluctant to provide a full picture of events or their contexts (*Liz Curtis's Ireland: The Propaganda War*).

In the early 1970s, the governmental controls meant that the IRA men couldn't be interviewed without prior permission from the authorities. No BBC unit could use an item from a news agency without first consulting with the newsroom in Belfast (Philip Schlesinger's *Putting 'Reality' Together*).

Tragically, some human rights' abuses have failed to make it to the public conscience due to the flawed performance of the media. However, despite all the curbs some journalists, over the years, have sought to combat state-sponsored controls, that is heartening and encouraging.

The Afghanistan War: During the Afghan war, thousands of press professionals actually put their lives at risk just to be "on the ground" to cover it. As many as eight journalists paid the ultimate price and they are no more.

Even though the journalists

Laden.

"If true, it opens up a rying development for organizations covering wars and conflicts: Now they can be targeted simply for reporting a side of the story that party wants suppressed."

The important question is: the US bombing had turned up was this: Wasn't the attack on Al Jazeera's offices an attack on all media, regardless of nationalities, cultures or religions? However, very few British journalists gave much attention to this troubling question.

In addition to the curbs when the Allies tried to directly gag the Taliban — in the process sending warning to all journalists — certain direct methods were employed, by the Bush and Clinton administrations to control what their media said about the war.

Several directives were issued from 10, Downing Street, for instance, that asked the media "not to relay" the Taliban's claims about the progress of war in Afghanistan without questioning them. One such directive was issued on Nov 8.

Then there were several claims by the Bush and Clinton administrations, that suggested that the footage of Osama bin Laden — handed over to the Al Jazeera — could contain certain coded messages and signals for members of the Al Qaeda network. It's difficult to assess exactly how much impact these preposterous claims had on media coverage of the war.

This is not to suggest that the performance of the British media was utterly hopeless. Far from it. There were some newspapers that did produce some priceless information, specially *The Guardian* and *The Independent*. However, one feels there was considerable room for improvement.

Conclusion: As is apparent from the above, it's difficult for truth to survive during wars. The government

tion to it. So, even during crucial period when the involvement was steadily waning and Ngo Dinh Diem's time was declining, the international news organizations largely depended on news agencies for day-to-day coverage.

During this period, an American military advisory group — the MAAG — was trying to conceal, as much as it could, the American involvement in the war against the Vietcong. This group wanted to make the reporters accomplices in their game of deception. The correspondents did not like this and some of them decided to place their comments on record (Phillip Knightley's *The First Casualty*).

The US reporters were fed up in order to conceal the full American involvement in the war. When the reporters tried to make it clear to the people that a deception game was being played, the authorities appealed to the correspondents' feelings of patriotism. Deception was necessary, said the authorities, because the communists had to be stopped and that the US had put all its chips on Diem.

However, this appeal failed, underlying the fact that up until then, the US reporters were making considerable effort to uncover and unearth the truth.

But interest in the war grew readily and surely. The British journalists soon got wind of what was transpiring behind the curtain of deception. They soon started discussing the extent of US involvement in the war. Meanwhile, Washington having failed to bring the

rebuttal story that had replaced theirs, they both walked.

Then we had photographs and reports from an AP journalist who had correctly and objectively covered a demonstration mounted by a large group of Buddhists, one of whom killed himself.

These are some of the people who ultimately forced the American people to hold mass demonstrations against the war and this is the type of work which made Washington bow to public demand. The moral of the story: Given a will, the war correspondents can, and often will, bring to the fore what the militaries seek to paper over.

The Arab-Israeli wars: Let's begin analysing the Middle East wars with an incident which shows that the BBC, considered to be absolutely neutral in the handling of news, was in the late '60s, biased against the Arabs. The broadcasting service was particularly unfair towards Gamal Abdul Nasser, the then ruler of Egypt.

Before interviewing him just prior to the 1967 war, BBC's Christopher Mayhew had sought an assurance from his superiors that Nasser's interview would be aired in full. Armed with this assurance, Mr Mayhew interviewed the Egyptian ruler. The exclusive 40-minute interview, recorded two days before the outbreak of war, provided rare insight into Nasser's personality, ideas and intentions.

However, saying that the questioning of Nasser was "soft", a BBC producer shelved the interview for a full two days. On the day the hostilities between the Israelis

rebuttal story that had replaced theirs, they both walked.

As a consequence of the stifling conditions the journalists were subjected to, the reporting was far from accurate. The British public, for instance, was denied knowledge that the warship *Invincible* had developed a major fault in one of its engines soon after it had left Portsmouth.

In the end, the MoD succeeded in doing, despite some efforts to change the situation by some newsmen, what its government had wanted it to. The Falklands War will thus go down in the history of journalism as a "glowing" example of how to handle media in times of war.

The Gulf War: The war in 1991 between Saddam Hussein's forces and the US-led military coalition was fought as much on the Kuwaiti and Iraqi ground as it was in the court of public opinion. And according to Philip Taylor's *War and the Media: Propaganda and Persuasion in the Gulf War*, although the conflict will long be remembered as a CNN war, it was no such thing. The war belonged to the US-led coalition, not the US-based news network.

By the end, the war had not only exorcised the Vietnam Syndrome from the American mind, but also had pointed towards the media's future, that belongs to technology. What's more, the idea that "(all) media are American" had gained wide currency.

Northern Ireland War: The Irish conflict has been included in this short study — even though it's a civil war — because it shows conclusively that even democratic governments try to cloak messy

Even though the journalists paid a heavy price — in terms of fatalities at least — one feels their coverage left much to be desired. I say this despite a few outstanding items in *The Independent* and *The Guardian*.

One of these was Robert Fisk's item on his own beating by some Afghan refugees.

Right from the word go, the Taliban were up against a formidable enemy, equipped with both superior firepower as well as media power.

The Guardian broke this news with one rather brief story titled *Move to silence Taliban's man in Pakistan*. One wonders what the length of the item would have been, had the Taliban taken a similar step. And would there be only one item on the issue in each newspaper? I think not.

The Allies' clout — this time in the form of superior firepower — was again on spectacular show when, on Nov 13, some US bombs completely destroyed the Kabul offices of the Al Jazeera TV network. Initially, the British media did make some noises about this bombing in which the BBC offices were also damaged. But the voices soon died down, though not before an interesting article by Matt Wells of *The Guardian* headlined *How smart was this bomb*.

Mr Wells spoke of the speculations that Al Jazeera's offices had been targeted deliberately. "The US had scored a direct hit on the offices of the Qatar-based TV station Al Jazeera, leading to speculation that the channel had been targeted deliberately because of its contacts with the Taliban and Osama bin

wars. The governments including democratic ones have learnt well the lessons of the Vietnam War. As a consequence, the freedoms of the kind enjoyed by war correspondents in Vietnam will not be made available to present and future war reporters.

What seems to be missing the collective will on the part of journalists to regroup in the face of tough controls enforced by the post-Vietnam governments. They have failed to come up with a game plan on which they could fall upon in case a warring side decides to be overly cautious or overzealous.

However, there's evidence to suggest — from all the wars analyzed — that there's a realization among journalists — the need to change the situation. There's evidence also show that atrocities at human rights abuses don't come down well with newsmen even if they are committed by their own governments. Some reports filed from Afghanistan are proof of this, as are dozens of items from the Vietnam War.

Truth does tend to make its way to the surface sooner or later. For example, many lies of the Falklands War, a particularly difficult one to cover, did come to the light of day, albeit after the conflict. These revelations didn't change the outcome of the Falklands War, how could they?

But, this and other examples have proved beyond a doubt that truth is often given a new lease of life once hostilities end. Truth and hope will never say die. Some journalists and scholars will see that.