

‘Truth is the First Casualty of War’

In the case of the Falklands Islands, both correspondents and commanders rode the fine and delicate line between fact and fabrication. This war was particular in its media coverage. Because of the remote location, inaccessibility played a major part in the transmission of information and, consequently, misinformation. As a result, the version of ‘truth’ that was delivered to the British and Argentine public was often a distorted compilation of speculations<sup>1</sup>, declaring ‘truth’ the first of many casualties. Not specific to this war is the relationship between military and media which is problematic as one party’s mission may oftentimes deviate from that of the other’s. Both have a responsibility to the public: protect and inform, respectively. But, in the case of the Falklands War, the material that reached print, radio and television had undergone a series of modifications that served the demands of both the government and the news organizations, each of which had their own agenda<sup>2</sup>. The rationale behind the engineering of ‘truth’ is two-fold: discretion and covertness are tools of military strategy, so the spread of information is carefully monitored; wartime gives rise to panic in the public. A vicious cycle emerges when information is withheld and, in turn, more panic arises, forcing news organizations to come up with explanations to quell the hysteria.

The ongoing dispute over territory in the South Atlantic resulted in a surrender of the Argentine junta and the subsequent end to their military government. Leopoldo Galtieri became president by way of a coup just a few months prior to the Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands. He briefly led the third of four consecutive military juntas. *El Proceso*, or The National Reorganization Process, was in control from 1976 until 1983 as the last dictatorship and *El Proceso* perpetuated a period of state-sponsored terrorism that began in 1974. Galtieri, Admiral

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<sup>1</sup> Adams, Valerie. 1986. *The Media And The Falklands Campaign*. New York: St. Martin's Press, viii

<sup>2</sup> Adams, *The Media and The Falklands Campaign*, vii

Jorge Anaya and Brigadier Basilio Lami Dozo ordered an occupation of the Islands on April 2, 1982 in an attempt to rescue Argentina from economic stagnation, distract its people from the regime's ongoing violence, and gain public support. Throughout the war, the military junta continued a system of propaganda and censorship that was set in place by the country's government in 1976. Its 'wishful thinking of the war' was evident in the news, just as they 'presented their wishful thinking of the economy and of the struggle against subversion,' all of which threatened nationalism in the country<sup>3</sup>.

The United Kingdom was no stranger to economic crisis in the early eighties. Margaret Thatcher and her Conservative government announced a series of adjustments, including cuts in the Royal Navy. It wasn't until March 31, only two days before the Argentine invasion, that Britain heard of the junta's plans for attack. As a response to the public fear that ensued, Margaret Thatcher gave First Sea Lord Sir Henry Leach the power to organize a Task Force that was devised to regain control of the Islands. By April 5, the first warships of the British Task Force set sail. For the next seventy-four days, both sides would suffer casualties in addition to three Falkland Islanders. The Argentine military lost 649 lives and the British lost 255, perhaps indicative of the power-shifting dynamic of a war that, while never officially declared, provoked the patriotism and national trust of each country. Argentina's unconditional surrender concluded the war on June 14, but the subject of the Falkland Islands remains a sensitive one. Each side was in a state of economic depression going into a war over territory and, in turn, a war over pride. Nationalism infused the Argentine and British public at first, transcending social and ideological divisions in each country, initially uniting them in the name of a common enemy. But this consensus did not endure the policies of foreign affair and public diplomacy. Despite the

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<sup>3</sup> Fox, E. 1984. "Mass Communications in The Falklands/Malvinas War". *Media, Culture & Society* 6 (1): 49

disagreement that would soon follow, the initial impetus set a tone for the remainder of war. Momentum and public attention were undeniably strong in both countries, at the onset and later as the events transpired. The progression of the war revealed varied opinions and opposition of what was once a trusted government in the United Kingdom, and the only government in Argentina. Because of this immense energy and sense of scepticism, there was an extremely high demand for news that reporters simply could not meet due to the lack of access and information.

The circulation of information coming from the South Atlantic was almost entirely controlled by the Ministry of Defense in both countries. Reporters could not move freely in and out of the arena of the Falklands War due to its inaccessibility, so coverage was limited and ‘the government had a monopoly in the dissemination of authoritative news about events’ in the combat zone<sup>4</sup>. The Ministry of Defense was in charge of delivering ‘comunicados’ or communiqués, so the news reaching the Argentine public was manipulated and sterilized. The Argentine military led its people to believe they were winning, and this ‘systematic, widespread and deliberate indoctrination of the population in a certain position, and deception and distortion of the truth’ was precisely mimetic of *El Proceso*’s absolute control and power<sup>5</sup>. Manipulated versions of truth that reached the Argentine public were strictly propaganda, and a ‘lack of reality was reflected in the treatment of war by television’ in order to bolster nationalism and perpetuate the belief that Argentina was victorious, up until the surrender at Port Stanley, when news suddenly stopped with no explanation<sup>6</sup>. Before Argentina’s public was notified of even the first soldier’s death, the truth had been buried. Through total domination of all information going in or out of the country, the military junta deceived its people time and time again. While the

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<sup>4</sup> Adams, *The Media and The Falklands Campaign*, 4

<sup>5</sup> Fox, *Mass Communications in The Falklands/Malvinas War*, 49

<sup>6</sup> Fox, *Mass Communications in The Falklands/Malvinas War*, 45

manipulation and embellishment of truth is quite obvious on the Argentine side, the people of the United Kingdom underwent a much subtler and more discrete persuasion.

Even though technology was advancing quite rapidly at the time, the isolated location of the front line proved to be an obstacle in the spread of information; dispatches took some time to arrive at the news desks and, because film could not be electronically transmitted, it had to be moved physically, prolonging the delivery process even further. The delay in reports caused panic in the public because ‘in war, no news is often taken to mean bad news.’<sup>7</sup> Reporters were hungry for a story, not only for investigative purposes, but to satisfy the people’s craving and curiosities as well. With time slots to fill and no material to do so, news reports were all too often comprised of speculations— not of *truth*.

What information was relayed to the British public had received similar treatment to that of the information sterilized by the Argentine government. A total of twenty-nine British reporters, cameramen and technicians joined the Task Force after much reluctance from the Royal Navy. The United Kingdom’s Ministry of Defense then gave commanders instructions to avoid certain topics with reporters. These topics included: ‘speculation about operational plans; operational capabilities of individual units and of all types of equipment; particulars of current tactics and techniques; logistics; intelligence about Argentine forces; communications; defects in equipment.’<sup>8</sup> All material was checked and approved by authorities initially, in either the Falklands or London. There was a sense of anonymity for the officials providing information at non-attributable briefings, or informal sessions, protecting the source from the question of accuracy. Anonymity is desired if the information were to be false because nobody wants to be responsible for misinformation, and if the information were to be true, there is risk of it reaching

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<sup>7</sup> Adams, *The Media and The Falklands Campaign*, vii

<sup>8</sup> Adams, *The Media and The Falklands Campaign*, 6

the enemy, another reason to evade blame. But Ian MacDonald, the Ministry of Defense's Chief of Public Relations, advised that the briefings be discontinued until their restoration on May 11. Until then, only formal statements were made. They provided little information and were 'couched in a cryptic and bureaucratic style' that used indirect language and were ultimately uninformative.<sup>9</sup> In this way, diction was incredibly important and the vocabulary employed was vague and ambiguous so as not to plant any of the wrong seeds in the public's consciousness and to conceal military plans. Unsurprisingly, this type of indirect news introduced fear, panic and distrust in the British public which escalated the pressure for each reporter to relay the most accurate news as quickly as possible. Such an obligation for the reporter may seem obvious to the average British citizen, 'but, while most correspondents saw their role in terms as clear and uncomplicated as this, others went through deep and sometimes agonising examination of their motives and began to question whether it was possible to cover the war with an untroubled conscience' amidst another war between military and press.<sup>10</sup> The journalist faces an ethical dilemma, trying to strike a balance between 'the public's right to information and the government's duty to withhold information for reasons of operational security.'<sup>11</sup> Reporters were constantly reassessing their values and intentions in addition to their loyalties because 'investigative journalism requires greater commitment and greater persistence in the face of official subterfuge since the journalist will be quarrying for facts which influential people wish to remain secret' from the enemy and the public.<sup>12</sup> Truthfulness introduces another issue the reporter is confronted with: work. What sells is not always what is most accurate and some journalists may have been willing to 'alter the content of their messages to make sure that the

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<sup>9</sup> Adams, *The Media and The Falklands Campaign*, 7

<sup>10</sup> Knightley, Phillip. 1975. *The First Casualty*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 407

<sup>11</sup> Adams, *The Media and The Falklands Campaign*, 9

<sup>12</sup> Mercer, Derrik, Geoff Mungham, and Kevin Williams. 1987. *The Fog Of War*. London: Heinemann, 12

message will appear. They may be willing to alter them even more in order to have them appear with prominent display' such as on the front page.<sup>13</sup> *The Sun*'s iconic headlines are still mentioned in today's scholarship concerning British public support of the Falklands War. Two front page articles in particular still call attention: '*Stick This Up Your Junta: A Sun Missile for Galtieri's Gauchos*' in which the publication said they sponsored a British missile, and *GOTCHA*, celebrating the torpedo attack of Argentine ship, *General Belgrano* which resulted in more than half of the Argentine casualties. Success of stories like these may have encouraged the manipulation of truth in the media. This kind of material spread hatred and xenophobia, while content that may have taken a different approach was not published. Significant in the relationship between press and public as well as press and government is the 'probability of false signals being sent in order to confuse or deceive the enemy' which serves to exemplify the manipulation of the media on the part of the military.<sup>14</sup>

Extreme frustration with arrangements made by the Ministry of Defense regarding the conditions of reporters' facilities and the unpredictable censorship of their work may have influenced their duty of equilibrium between the two ethics. Parliament was equally discontent with the media because of some of the objective approaches taken in addition to the criticism of military matters. News organizations like the BBC defended not 'merely [the] right, but [the] duty to be as objective as possible in its reporting of the conflict' as a response to criticism that the publication of revealing stories is an advantage to the enemy. The corporation maintained that its accuracy is more valuable than its loyalty, both to the British public and the world as a top source. Other organizations in the media defended the BBC, including the *Observer*, and

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<sup>13</sup> Turner, Kathleen J. 1985. *Lyndon Johnson's Dual War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 12

<sup>14</sup> Mercer, Mungham, Williams, *The Fog of War*, 2

criticisms of the Ministry of Defense hit every angle of its management of the press.<sup>15</sup> Michael Reupke of *Reuters* states that the news source ‘would not wish to jeopardize lives, but during the Falklands War it saw no distinction between British or Argentinian lives’ and evidently took an objective stance that rivalled the government’s agenda.<sup>16</sup> Silencing the expression of opinions that challenged Parliament’s stance and plans was not only unjust in the censorship of its own people, but this deprived the people of a multi-faceted education regarding the events in the South Atlantic. Censorship deprives people ‘of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth’ and the British government supported and encouraged the ‘stifling’ of opinions.<sup>17</sup> To satisfy the demand of material, organizations forfeited truthfulness and as a result, the spread of false information wrongly educated the public and deprived British citizens of a necessary and dynamic conversation.

Journalists who covered the Falklands War were constantly facing a moral dilemma: to deliver the most accurate news to a public with the right to know, or to deliver a manufactured version of that so as to protect them against a potential threat? Torn between his duty as a reporter and his duty as a British citizen, the correspondent simply could not win: ‘if he puzzled over his professional ethics too long, he risked missing a picture’ that could make or break the war, or make front page.<sup>18</sup> This problem was most pressing for those actually in the South Atlantic, but news organizations grappled with this issue from home as well. By manipulating and embellishing the facts, both governments wronged their people, depriving the public in an enormous way. They tailored the truth to what they wanted their public to hear and to know. Misinformation and speculation are no foundation for discussion or trust, and the consequent

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<sup>15</sup> Adams, *The Media and The Falklands Campaign*, 9

<sup>16</sup> Mercer, Mungham, Williams, *The Fog of War*, 11

<sup>17</sup> Mill, John Stuart. "Of The Liberty of Thought and Discussion." *On Liberty*: II.2

<sup>18</sup> Knightley, *The First Casualty*, 409

distrust and suspicion of the government by its people was absolutely just. On the part of Argentine news, the public was not only misled, but blatantly lied to until their military's surrender that ended the war. Secrecy and covert operations are a part of military strategy. In this respect, the concealing of information was crucial to both sides. But lies are a form of betrayal and unsurprisingly create a degree of mistrust and scepticism that further unsettles a nation during wartime. In this case, governments, not journalists, are the assassins of truth. Before any news of casualties were delivered to the public, in the case of the Falklands War, what first reached newsstands, television sets and radios was a lie, and therefore the first casualty of war.

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