

MEDIA & THE WAR IN KOSOVO

MY JOB: AT THE SHARP END OF THE MEDIA OPERATION

Oona Muirhead

**Director of Information Strategy and News
Ministry of Defence**

Q: *When was your Directorate established and was the thinking behind its creation?*

A: It was established as part of the restructuring of the Defence Information Division, accomplished in October 1997. The purpose behind the restructuring was twofold. First, to bring the presentational work of the Department much closer to the policy and decision-making elements. Before the restructuring, the Defence Information Division was in a separate division. One could have regarded it almost as being 'bolted on' to the Department. It was an information division which sat alone, and reported fairly directly up to the Permanent Secretary. In some ways this was good: you want a close link between the head of presentation and, if you like to use a very rough term, the 'top of the shop.' The trouble was—and I can say this as I came from the 'other side of the fence' in the Department—that it was very much looked at as a separate entity; it was not seen as part of the overall defence effort in the way that it should have been. There are all sorts of historic reasons for that, which there is no real point in going into. Part of the explanation belonged to the Cold War and the fact that people within the Ministry of Defence had grown up thinking that they should just get on with their job without revealing too many details. There was very much a feeling that 'careless talk can cost lives'.

We are in a very different environment now. So the second reason for the restructuring was to put great effort into telling as much as we can to our own public and the international community, including academics and opinion formers. Telling them what defence is all about and why it is necessary; why we should spend money, time and effort on defence. Creating this Directorate and the new structure within the Defence Information Division

was about giving that message both externally and internally. Internally, by bringing us into the policy makers and saying to the policy makers that presentation is a part of what you do: when you think about a policy and you put policy advice to the Secretary of State or a Defence Minister you must also think about how you are going to present it. Does it make sense? Who do you need to tell? Who do you want on side? Who needs to know about this? And who else should we tell about it? To the external audience we are saying: 'we are here, defence is important. It may not be part of your everyday lives in the same way that education and health are, but it is, nonetheless, a very important part of all of our lives, and therefore we are going to tell you about it so that you understand why it is important'.

Q: *There has been a lot of discussion about 'spinning' news. How do you see the difference between a frivolous attempt to put a good 'spin' on any story, and the duty of conveying accurate information about the Services?*

A: It is rather unfortunate that this term of 'spinning' has become a frivolous issue. The real question is: how professional are we? If I was in charge of Selfridges, for instance, and I wanted to attract people into my store, I would make sure that the people I had making up the windows were doing it in a very professional way and in a way that



Based on an
interview with Miss
Oona Muirhead on
19 July 1999.

attracted the customer. I regard my job here as trying to put across what we are doing in the most attractive and understandable way. I consider that to be natural, and if I do not do it then, frankly, I deserve to be sacked. I get irritated by people talking about frivolous 'spin', because I do not think that it is frivolous at all. It is a very serious preoccupation to make what MoD does accessible, interesting and factual. What surprises me sometimes on this concept of 'spinning' is the idea that presenting your argument in a coherent way which is most likely to persuade your audience is somehow a dishonourable occupation. If you are writing a letter to another department, if you are writing a submission to a Minister, you will of course set out the pros and cons but you will then seek to persuade that your recommendation is the right one. If that is what people mean by spinning then I am guilty, but so is every professional in the public and private sector—and rightly so.

There is, of course, also the concept of 'news management'. If I have an important piece of news that I want to get across to my target audiences I will try to choose a day that is not likely to be crowded out by other news. Actually, I would like my piece of news to be on the front page, above the fold.

That is news management. Equally, if I have a story, or I know that there is something coming up, like, let us say, a court martial—sex on board HMS *Invincible*, noise of Harriers drowning cries of ecstasy—that is the sort of story that is, frankly, irrelevant to what matters in defence. But it is the sort of thing that makes easy, sensational news. News management would be to try and fill that space before they have got the story about sex. If that is spin then, again, I am guilty. So what?

Q: *When you first started at this job, what did you consider to be the most important challenge?*

A: I thought that I had two important challenges. One was to get out into the Department to give the message that what they did was potentially interesting and newsworthy, and that they should tell my Division about it. I had been in defence for a long time, and had been in some fairly high profile jobs.

That was a help, for members of the Department could see me as one of them, and could trust me to make a judgement about how much we should tell the outside world. Getting that message across to the department, from the very top to the very bottom, was the first of my challenges. That meant that I needed to be close to the Secretary of State, the Permanent Secretary and his senior staff. I attend the Permanent Secretary's staff meeting every Monday morning. I attend the Secretary of State's key meetings and remain close to the Chief of Defence Staff himself and the other Chiefs. I feed from these top level sources, to know what the

Department is doing and therefore what to tell the outside world. I am also able to remind them, at that level, that presentation is an important part of their work and get that message down to the lower levels of the department, the 'worker bees'.

The second challenge was to try to improve the profile of defence in the outside world. This is more difficult for the two reasons I have mentioned. First, because defence is not normally a 'top of the mind' issue, and secondly because there will always be events that conspire to give us a bad press. You will always have young men and women doing

things that you would prefer they did not do; one will have to deal with the court martials for bullying and violence, drug taking, etc. At the same time, you almost have to ignore them: you have to make it clear that such activities will not be tolerated, but you must not let the coverage get you down. You have got to keep finding the important and positive things that we are doing. People in defence do an awful lot of things that are hugely interesting. The challenge is to get that across to the outside world.

Q: *How big is your budget and how many staff have you got?*

A: My budget (which excludes staff costs) is about £800 000, a chunk of which goes on what we call, 'The Defence Tourer', which is a touring exhibition that goes around the country in the summer months. This allows us to interact directly with the public. Every year we have around

**People in
defence do an
awful lot of
things that
are hugely
interesting.
The challenge is
to get that
across to the
outside world.**

MEDIA & THE WAR IN KOSOVO

400 000 visitors. Each one is given a scratch card, they go around all the panels, answer the questions on the scratch card, they talk to the civilians and servicemen we have on the stand. Setting that up every year is quite a big task. We also produce books and fact-sheets, which we have on our defence touring stand and which we send out to academics and institutions. We are starting to put together a schools pack. So a lot of my budget is on factual promotional material.

I have just under thirty staff, split between the press office and my forward planning unit which is looking at strategies: what do we think is an important theme, or an important type of activity which we are doing? For example, crisis prevention is an important activity that we are promoting over the next six to twelve months as part of 'making the world a safer place.' So, my planning team will look at building up a strategy to present what we are doing on crisis prevention. Also in my planning unit is my paid publicity section, who are project managers essentially and for example put out to tender publications we publish, such as the defence booklets on the environment, or on joint defence forces.

Q: *Let me turn to what was clearly the key project so far this year. How did you prepare for the media onslaught on the eve of the Kosovo crisis?*

A: We had had quite a good 'dress rehearsal' last year with Operation Desert Fox in Iraq, which had taught us an enormous amount about the sort of information that we would require and the way in which we would have to harness the efforts of the Department in supporting Ministers and the Defence Information Division to get our messages across to our range of target audiences. We knew that we would want to have a daily press conference as a main vehicle for getting the facts and our message across to the public in Britain and overseas.

Preparing for setting up that press conferences was a key element of our effort. First, however, we had to decide where our centre of 'media gravity' was going to be, very much in the same way as you would do in a military campaign. Once we got to the

point of sending forces in on the ground, as we knew we would have to, to get the refugees back, the centre of gravity would be in theatre, and we would have to be prepared for that. We had to have worked up people to go into theatre, and have our relationship with the media developed so that, for example, we could set up pool arrangements for the initial stages of that campaign, however long that happened to be. But we understood that, as long as the air campaign continued, the centre of gravity was going to be London, because it was to be very much a strategic campaign at that point. The best way of getting the information out to everybody was

The best way of getting the information out to everybody was by having a daily press conference.

by having a daily press conference. Otherwise, we would have been deluged by media enquiries trying to suck information from us, rather than allowing us to push the information out to them. In preparing for the press conferences we knew that we would need to have a well-oiled machine to provide, firstly, the information required for Ministers and Chief of Defence Staff for their scripts and, secondly, to provide material for the press packs, arrange video link-ups and bring in other inter-

national players, particularly important in a multinational NATO operation like this, and crucial since part of our message was precisely that of NATO solidarity. So, for example, we had a joint press conference with M. Richard, the French Defence Minister, on a link between London and Paris.

Q: *It was clear to you from the beginning that you would have the support of the senior Government Ministers to put them on stage instead of the traditional spokesmen of the past?*

A: We had full ministerial support from the start. When you refer to 'traditional spokesmen', that was certainly what happened during the Falklands War. During the Gulf War, the centre of gravity was more in the region, and so it is not a direct comparison. I do not think that we felt we needed to be constrained by the way in which things had been done in the past. We felt that it was important to put Ministers, the Chief of Defence Staff, the Deputy-Chief of Defence Staff, up there to answer questions and to be answerable to the decisions that they were taking and the actions that they were in charge of.

MEDIA & THE WAR IN KOSOVO

Q: *Did you ever envisage that the operation was going to take that long? And, when this became apparent, did you think that you would be able to pull off these appearances every single day?*

A: It was certainly a lot of effort. At points during the first few weeks I had a number of people come asking me how long it would go on for: 'are we really going to continue these daily press conferences', they asked. I was quite firm, and said that from my perspective, and this was my advice to the Secretary of State, we are going to continue doing this for as long as it takes. Interestingly, when we came back from the NATO Summit in Washington at the end of April, some of those who had questioned the effort turned to me and said to me that they understood why we had to continue doing it, and why it was important. What some people did not realise until they saw with their own eyes the world media coverage, was that the message of these daily press conferences, sometimes attended by small numbers of journalists, was getting to millions of people around the world via television networks such as SKY, CNN, or the BBC. This helped shore up international solidarity and support, as well as contributing operationally by getting the message to Milošević that we were not going away. When they realised that, they concluded that the effort was worthwhile.

Q: *During this long campaign, what would you say were your biggest triumphs and what was your darkest hour?*

A: I have thought about this, but I do not think that I have any one triumph or any one darkest hour. Like any campaign—for the media campaign is part of the operational one and therefore mirrors what is happening on that front—you start with a heavy heart. We hoped that the peace negotiations in France would succeed and that the Serbs would sign up. When they did not, we knew what had to come and what needed to be done with the media in support of the defence effort as a whole. So, it was a bit gloomy at that point.

Then, of course, the weather was bad in the

Balkans for long periods, so we were not moving ahead with the speed that we would have liked, and that translated into periods of gloom. We had to rise above that, and make sure we continued to transmit a message of determination and optimism. The good times were when we felt we *had* got our message across to our audiences, sometimes despite the media. For example, one day the media concentrated on a 'NATO blunder', a tragic error which was very depressing for us as well. We knew that we had to get the message back on to the main issues: the plight of the refugees, the humanitarian disaster that was unfolding on the ground. We had a satellite video link with Brigadier Tim Cross in Macedonia, in one of the refugee camps, and one Albanian girl who had been separated from her parents and had been thrown out of Kosovo told her story. This was a tale of human tragedy, multiplied by one hundred thousand every week. This helped remind people what the campaign was all about. That, in turn, helped maintain public support and coalition solidarity. At times like that, you knew you were making a contribution to winning the campaign.

Q: *Is it possible to compare the way in which we handled the media with the way other allied governments performed during the campaign?*

A: Comparisons are a bit invidious, to be quite honest. We had had the experience which most of our allies had not. As I mentioned, last December we had had Desert Fox, and in the spring of last year we thought that we would have to mount a campaign in Iraq. We had learnt from that, and we were ready for it, in a way in which our allies could not be expected to be unless they were extremely prescient and had made it a high priority. Furthermore, we have the advantage of speaking English, which made our press conferences instantly accessible to world media networks and allowed for live transmission, something which obviously did not apply to all our allies.

Q: *In his recent address to the Institute, the Prime Minister's press secretary admitted that there are still many lessons to be learned. What do you think are these lessons?*

MEDIA & THE WAR IN KOSOVO

A: I want us to analyse the campaign properly first, before reaching conclusions and see where we could do better. One area that was raised when Alastair Campbell gave his lecture was on providing pictures to back up the information. There is a point there: next time, we need to think about the 'pictures-make-news' syndrome to a greater extent. We did think about it, and we did have stills, but we need to think more about moving pictures. We were at a disadvantage because we only deployed Phoenix out there at the very end. Had we had Phoenix earlier, and next time around we would have, then we might have found that we had more moving pictures to show to the media. We also had TIALD imagery. But one laser guided bomb going into an ammunition depot looks rather like another. They became tedious to the press after a while, so you have to constantly think up new ways of backing up the words you utter. We have to try and think more creatively, maybe get outside expertise to give us help. After all, the broadcasters that have to perform around the clock also find that they need ever more pictures to present the same story; we face exactly the same problem.

Q: *You did not want the media to concentrate on the alleged mishaps of the Alliance's air campaign, but on the atrocities on the ground. You failed on that score, because the media did concentrate on the 'cock-ups'.*

A: I don't agree with you that we failed; this is taking matters out of proportion. Indeed, proportion is the issue here. It is no good trying to conceal the fact that there were NATO mistakes. That was not our intention at all; in fact, we were very up front about the mistakes. What we were trying to do was to get the media to put it into proportion—to say: 'yes, NATO has made a mistake, but what has been happening in the Balkans for the last ten years is no mistake'. Now, is that our responsibility or is that the media's responsibility? I think both. It is actually up to the media to think a bit harder about their own role in the campaign. I am not suggesting that they should take everything that we say and

write it down as gospel, of course. They have got to use their own commercial judgement as to how to present a story. But, they do have to think about their target audiences in the same way that we do.

One of the challenges in media operations is that the number of target audiences increases. In peacetime one is dealing mainly with target audiences which are probably benevolently disposed, or at least can be engaged in a constructive dialogue. In a war operation, you have a target audience (the 'enemy') with whom you have no contact other than through the media. Milošević is watching CNN and he is getting messages from CNN, BBC and SKY. That is in addition to your national, UK audience, and the international audience in, say France, Italy or Greece, who may also be wondering if NATO is doing the right thing. That makes it more complicated for us, because the more target audiences you have, the more complex your message becomes. It also means that the media have to recognise that their messages and commentary are going not only to the national audience but also to that enemy audience. They

need to bear that very much in mind. I do not have any particular solution to the problem. Maybe a closer dialogue would help, but I would like to hear from the media what they would want to do about it. In a sense I am slightly wary of making proposals that are seen as government interference.

Q: *The enemy is also learning media handling: Saddam Hussein kept a CNN journalist in Baghdad at the height of the war, and Milošević invited some Western journalists to stay in Belgrade at the height of the bombardment. Kosovo was out of bounds to journalists, apart from the time when Milošević wanted to show an alleged NATO 'atrocities'. This is obviously becoming part of a pattern. Are you prepared to release raw intelligence in the future in order to indicate to the media that the enemy is lying? Satellite imagery from Kosovo—could it have been released in larger quantities, and would it have made a difference?*

A: It will certainly always be our aim to release intelligence material where we can, but we have to remember that the media war is only one element of the campaign. It is a very delicate balance to be struck here, and within MoD we had these sorts of discussions quite often. There is a tension between the operational and intelligence staff on the one hand, and my Directorate on the other: I will be constantly pushing to get material released, and they will be keen to ensure that they are not compromising intelligence sources. I recognise the problems that the intelligence staff face. In turn, they now better understand why it is important to keep trying to see how much you can release. There is no simple answer, however; that tension will persist.

Q: *Let us return to the day-to-day routine activity. What happens, for instance, when there is a sudden story in the media and there is an avalanche of questions to you, asking for substantiation or interviews with the Secretary of State. How do you move from normal day-to-day activity and into crisis 'mode'?*

A: Clearly, we will redirect resources within my Division towards that crisis. Our first aim will be to avoid sitting here just answering the telephones because it is a very inefficient way of getting the facts out to the outside world. Getting on to the front foot is therefore crucial. It can be done in a number of ways. First of all, get our story out onto the wires, out to the Press Association and Reuters. They are hugely influential with every newspaper, every media outlet in this country; they all feed from the wires. For example, take the *Strategic Defence Review* last year, which was leaked just before we announced it. I was in the press office at about ten o'clock the evening before we announced the SDR. We were finalising some of the Secretary of State's articles which were going to the regional press, when a telephone call came from Alastair Campbell, who informed me that Lobby correspondents in Parliament had got hold of copies of the SDR. We had to take immediate action.

My concern in the immediate run up to that announcement was that the Secretary of State should stand up before the House of Commons, that he would stand tall, and tell the House of Commons

of his review. Everything that we had put in place was based on the principle that the House had to be informed first. On the day of the announcement, by prearrangement we kept the journalists in our building, minus their mobile phones, until the Secretary of State finished his opening statement to the House. When the leak occurred, I was worried about the constitutional propriety, but also about how the SDR story would be covered in the media. In fact, on the second point, I think it was a huge tribute to the SDR and the work that the Department had done that the coverage the next day, despite the fact that the media had had to read the

whole White Paper themselves, and pick out their own stories, was all positive. So it came out fine, but we had to take very rapid action that night to prevent this becoming nothing but a 'leak' story. So we put out a statement on to the Press Association in which the Secretary of State expressed his anger at the leak, and promised a thorough inquiry. The other thing we would want to do in similar situations is to get on to the broadcast outlets soon as possible. Ministers

will go down to Millbank¹, for what we call 'the Millbank round'. Essentially, he goes down to Millbank and does either pre-recorded or live interviews with all the major broadcast channels. If you are confronted with that kind of crisis, then my advice is always get on to the front foot. Get out there and proactively tell your side of the story.

Q: *Would you have access to the Secretary of State and would he, and other ministers, listen to you about the importance of doing a particular interview with a particular media as opposed to another?*

A: The answer to both of those questions is 'yes'. I have a very close relationship with the Secretary of State; in a sense, I regard myself as being part of his private office. I can have access to him any time I need, providing, of course, that he is contactable. On the second question, he will have his own ideas as well, and I do not pretend to have the monopoly of wisdom on which programme would be better than another. I will talk to colleagues here, I will talk to special advisers in case they have got a particular insight. But yes, I will make a particular recommendation to the Secretary of State.

MEDIA & THE WAR IN KOSOVO

Q: *You are a woman and a civilian. Did you ever feel somehow at a disadvantage in dealing very closely with military personnel and how do you interact with the three Services' own media efforts?*

A: We act very closely together, the Directors of Public Relations: they support me on news handling and news management and have important functions of their own. I do not think that they notice that I am a woman. There have, of course, been occasions in my career when I have been irritated by the way in which some will initially address you—thinking only men do important jobs! But this is something that has changed for the better over my twenty years in the MoD, as the armed

Forces themselves have opened up to women. I have certainly never found any disadvantage personally. If I am in a military environment I am very capable of taking care of myself, and I have always found that good military colleagues will very quickly make those who are confused by the lack of uniform aware of the fact that their attitude may be inappropriate. So, I have certainly never found it to be a disadvantage, but there have been occasions when it has been an irritant. No more than that. □

NOTES

1 The Millbank building next to Parliament is the site of many media networks.

EUROPEAN DEFENCE CRITERIA

A Workshop at RUSI

1400-1800, Wednesday 6 October

The countries of NATO and the European Union have agreed that Europe must in future possess improved military capabilities, both for a more effective European role in NATO and to allow for autonomous EU actions should the need arise. Following expressions of broad agreement from partner governments regarding the principle of yardsticks being applied to European defence, the British and Italian governments in July 1999 launched a joint proposal for defence criteria to be set. These criteria should be discussed and agreed later in the year at the WEU Ministerial meeting in Luxembourg and the European Council in Helsinki. This RUSI half-day workshop will bring together high-level experts to analyse the issues as the policies are forming. The following four areas will be addressed:

- **Concepts of Material and Non-material Defence Criteria**
- **Complementarity and Interoperability**
- **European Policy on Armaments**
- **Prospects for Convergence**

Speakers invited include: EMYR JONES PARRY CMG, Political Director, Foreign & Commonwealth Office; NICOLE GNESOTTO, Director designate, WEU Institute for Security Studies; ANDREW SLEIGH, Dir-Gen Info & Comms Systems, Ministry of Defence; LT GEN EDOUARD VALENSI, Délégation Generale à l'Armement; JOHN HOWE CB OBE, Dep Chief of Defence Procurement (Support), Ministry of Defence. *Registration Fee:* £30 + VAT, total **£35.25**. Further details and registration instructions will be available from early September from Eleanor Ford, RUSI Studies Coordinator.

Tel: (020) 7 930 5854

Fax: (020) 7 321 0943

Website: www.rusi.org