

# MANIPULATING THE MEDIA

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## History, Theory and the Media

As a starting point for deliberation on 'Air Power and Joint Forces', the RAAF could hardly have done better than to call the attention of contributors to this volume to John Slessor's notable book *Air Power and Armies* of 1936. One of the very few books written on the theory and practice of air forces in co-operation with other armed forces, this book consists chiefly of the lectures that Slessor gave as RAF Member of the Directing Staff at the old Army Staff College Camberley 1931-1934. Despite their different names Sandhurst and Camberley are physically located on the same site, and on most days I drive past the building where Slessor gave those lectures. But for all its merit, to a historian asked to consider the media as an issue related to asymmetric threats, Slessor's book has a questionable point of departure. Specifically, on the first page of the introduction, Slessor repeats with all the confidence that historians associate with an innovative, thinking, middle-ranking officer destined for high rank the most frequent military *mistake* about the nature of history:

My sole object has been to draw conclusions on which to base useful lessons for the future. After all, the really important function for any kind of military history is not to serve as interesting material for the general reader, but to enable commanders and staff officers to be wise *before* the event.

If only it were that simple. Only the most ignorant would suggest that commanders and staff officers should not study history. Equally, military personnel can qualify or re-qualify as historians given the necessary education and experience, just as they may re-qualify for other professions. Interestingly, it also works the other way around, and professional historians have a very good record of retraining as intelligence officers. But historians, like intelligence officers, know that if an individual or institution wants evidence of something badly enough, they will find it whether it is there or not; and conversely if the facts present a picture that they do not want to see, then they will not see it. There have been many cases of the 'lessons' of history being like this, and quite a number have appeared in discussions over the last few decades on the relationship between the armed forces and the mass news media. All too often, reporters and serving officers hold and defend very fixed positions, rather than being willing to explore what has been a complex series of events. Real history is a protracted, uncertain, messy business, much best left to professionals.

The problem of whether 'lessons' can be drawn from history is also directly connected to the contemporary issue of the role of the mass communications media in military operations. What connects them is that, above all, history means *context* for modern events and modern ideas. Sixty years ago when Slessor wrote and flourished, the most notorious weakness among political and institutional leaders was scientific and technological ignorance. There is a famous anecdote that when in the early stages of the Second World War the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) complained that all

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<sup>1</sup> Although the author at the time of writing was an employee of the British Ministry of Defence the views expressed here are his own and not those of any organisation or institution.

the best radio frequencies had been taken by other organisations, the minister responsible replied that he would ask Churchill to create some even better ones! But in today's age of humanitarian war, peace operations, and complex emergencies (and the other doctrinal terms used officially or unofficially by armed forces to cover such difficult military operations), the problem is more likely to be an ignorance of the results of previous attempts, of culture and ethics, of belief systems and social interaction, of political thought and factual evidence – in short an ignorance of history. To cite only the most obvious example, recent peacekeeping could have learned a lot from closer study of the UN involvement in the Congo 1960-1962, rather than trying to re-invent doctrines and procedures from scratch.

Recently, air power pundits have been particularly guilty, as part of a fashion among strategic thinkers, of trying to bolster a weak case with questionable historical analogies, presumably on the theory that the audience will be impressed by the unfamiliar. The 1999 Nato bombing campaign over Kosovo has been compared both with the legions of Imperial Roman and 18th century siege warfare. There have been ostensibly serious discussions as to whether Ghengis Khan practised *blitzkrieg* or information warfare. Above all, the bombing campaigns of the Second World War have been repeatedly used not to illuminate present issues, but entirely as a cultural reference point for modern uses of air power. The failure to explain to the wider public the changes in the technology and use of force that have happened since 1945, and particularly since 1990, is one of the more important problems facing the users of military force today.

These complex military changes have also been accompanied by changes almost as great in the technology and organisation of the news media themselves. The expansion in civilian global communications was already visible in 1989 in the way that Western radio, television and newspapers covered events in the Soviet Union and China. By the 1991 Gulf War it was obvious that a major change in war reporting had come into being. The British television journalist Nik Gowing (presently anchorman for BBC World Television) has characterised the 1990s as 'The Decade of the Dish'.

But globalisation of media communications has since 1989 become part of a wider social, cultural and commercial trend: the decline of 'old media' or 'old news' (network television, broadsheet newspapers and weekly current affairs journals) against the rise of 'new news' (satellite and cable television, television and radio chat shows, tabloid newspapers) as the principal means by which most people obtain their understanding of the world. Added to this has been the marked decline of the professional or specialist defence correspondent, the increasing youth and inexperience of military affairs of television or newspaper staff, and the information stream offered on a global and continuous basis to media outlets. There is presently a widespread belief that, with cheap video cameras and fax machines, the media are everywhere and everyone is a journalist. The famous pictures of a dead American soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu in October 1993 were taken not by a professional journalist but by a Somali driver, using a Hi-8 video camera left behind by a departing Reuters' team which had employed him as a stringer.

The most recent and important addition to 'new news' has, of course, been the Internet, which has grown from the creation of the World Wide Web in 1992 to make it a significant factor for operations in both Kosovo and East Timor in 1999, if only as a form of elite communication. In the period of the Kosovo conflict, March-June 1999, the number of Internet connections in Yugoslavia, including Kosovo itself, doubled to over 50,000 (the number doubled again in the following year). By 31 March 1999, the British government official website on Kosovo was receiving 150,000 hits a day, 1400 of them from within Yugoslavia; and inhabitants of Kosovo were e-mailing accounts of Serb

atrocities to London for future war crimes prosecutions. An accompanying British government website in the Serbian language received 10,000 hits from within Yugoslavia in its first five days. This degree of interpermeability, with Internet communications bypassing the traditional gatekeeper function of 'old news', is now a feature of military operations. It has been suggested that in 1999 the Internet made its first impact on warfare in the way that, back in 1950, what was then the equally immature phenomenon of television made its impact on the war in Korea. It is perhaps interesting to speculate from this what an Internet Vietnam might be like.

## **Manipulating the Media**

The title of this paper, 'Manipulating the Media', is not a personal choice, but simply the working title that I was originally given. Of course we all recognise the dangers of such words. The armed forces of a democratic country, in peace or at war, have no more right or authority to manipulate their own domestic media than to manipulate the law. To cite no other text, the landmark UN 1991 Windhoek Declaration is quite explicit on this matter. Even to raise this issue take us into areas of subversion from which most officers instinctively shy away. Armed forces do have a perfect right to attempt to *influence* the media, but that is another matter, and one on which the distinction should be clear-cut and absolute.

In this respect, and since issues of credibility often rate so highly on operations, members of some armed forces often do themselves no favours in their own thinking and writing about the media. In East Timor in 1999 UN forces led by Australia engaged in a United Nations Chapter 7 peacekeeping operation – or what current British doctrine calls peace enforcement. If a middle-ranking officer had described this as Australia 'going off to war', then it would be apparent that he did not understand his mission. In another context, someone who spoke of 'saturation bombing' when he meant 'close air support' would perhaps be less clearly mistaken, but would have given a very misleading impression of what was actually happening. Yet military opinions are given and even published in Australia and other countries describing manipulation of the media as part of information warfare; confusing media operations with psyops; and describing Nato as employing 'censorship' of the United States' domestic media during the Kosovo crisis – something which would have been physically impossible as well as quite illegal. Such writings only serve to fuel suspicions among media critics of the armed forces, some of whom need little encouragement. One of the fundamental principles of military-media relations since the First World War, at least in Britain, has been 'Never tell a conscious lie to the press'. In an article in the British newspaper *The Guardian* in March 2000 one long-serving journalist and critic of all things military, the London-based Australian reporter Philip Knightley, preferred to give his own version of this as 'Lie directly only when certain that the lie will not be found out in the course of the war'.

One of the curiosities – perhaps even one of the asymmetries – of this subject is the surprising absence of any proper analysis of the role of the media on operations, and their impact on the wider public, in current or even classic air power theory. During recent decades theorists of air power have been deeply concerned with strategies of coercion and containment, of deterrence and of psychological operations (psyops – or 'psyop' in the American). The single most useful and undervalued psychological weapon of the 20th century has been the humble air-delivered leaflet, when linked to a bombing campaign. Airmen have also been at the forefront of developing command and control warfare (C2W), and information warfare in its purely technological sense of physical or electronic attack on hostile information systems. Obviously all these developments are

related to what in the 1990s we came to call ‘media war’, the interaction between politics, public opinion, the mass media and military operations; and logically an appreciation of the media and its role should be close to the heart of modern air power theories. But in searching both theory and practice, this is not what we find. Armies and even navies have given considerable attention to this issue, and now expect to deploy with well-organised media plans, but there has been almost no interest from air forces. The lack of co-ordination between the Nato air campaign and the media campaign over Kosovo last year is again a case in point. This mismatch, both in theory and practice, of the assumptions behind the use of air power and the findings of research into the media will be one of my main themes today.

Conversely, there is also no doubt that one of the legitimate functions of the news media themselves, as part of civil society within democratic countries, is to influence both political elites and the wider public. Whether the news media should try to *manipulate* either the deployment of armed forces or their conduct once deployed is a matter of great controversy. Some war reporters believe strongly in what the veteran Martin Bell of the BBC (since 1997 a British member of parliament) has called ‘the journalism of attachment’. In the long-running involvement of UN forces in former Yugoslavia 1991-1995, journalists more than once told senior officers in confidence that they had chosen their side, and that their personal objective was to promote even greater and more violent Western military intervention.

Even without such extremes, there can be many difficulties in the relationship between armed forces and the media on operations. There are few more potentially explosive culture-clashes than that between, on the one hand, reporters who regard it as their fundamental role to cast doubt on the statements and motives of any authority figure, and on the other hand, senior officers who are not used to having their pronouncements questioned, and who regard such behaviour as an attack on their personal honesty and professional integrity. The British commander of the UN Protection Force in Sarajevo in 1994, Lieutenant General Sir Michael Rose, not only physically threatened a journalist who had raised such doubts in print, but retells the story in his own memoirs *Fighting for Peace* with much pride and enjoyment.

However, the days are also long gone – if they ever actually existed – when the armed forces and the media on operations could ignore one another. The institutional and technological changes of recent decades have increased the speed of media interaction with ‘real time’ political and military events, and the penetration of both the old and new media into their very fabric. In a famous remark made during the 1991 Gulf War, Benjamin Netanyahu (then Israel’s deputy foreign minister) spoke of ‘a Heisenberg physics of politics. Once you observe a phenomenon with television, instantly you modify it somehow’. Naturally, this interaction between events and the manner in which they are reported has not applied to all military operations of the 1990s, nor has it invalidated the experience of previous decades. What it has done is to remove any doubt that media issues, and the manner in which the media war is fought, have now become a consideration of the first importance on military operations.

Given these difficulties it seemed appropriate (in what may prove to be an act of incredible folly) to accept the challenge offered by the phrase ‘Manipulating the Media’, and the wider challenge offered by the theme of asymmetry. What approach would be used by those actively interested in manipulating the media for their own purposes, and unconcerned about the political legitimacy of their actions? There have been two broad scenarios for this in recent times. One scenario is of a state or sub-state government and people, under threat from a more powerful neighbour, who are actively trying to provoke western military intervention in support of their ambitions, or even their own survival in

the form of humanitarian assistance. The other scenario is of an undemocratic head of state interested in ways of using the media in all its forms to offset the effects of an attack by western powers that begins with an air campaign and may escalate to a ground war.

### **The CNN Effect?**

In the case of the first scenario the issue is whether the Western media, most obviously that of the United States, can be manipulated in order to bring about a military deployment; and if so, how this can be done. In other words, is there such a thing as ‘The CNN Effect’? The modern prototype for such cases came in 1990 when the Kuwaiti government, its country under Iraqi occupation, spent US\$10.8 million chiefly through the Washington public relations firm Hill & Knowlton, on a propaganda campaign aimed at elite and general American public opinion. This included the notorious televised testimony to the Congressional Caucus on Human Rights on 10 October 1990 by a Kuwaiti girl that Iraqi soldiers had thrown babies out of their incubators. The story, briefly taken up by Amnesty International and repeated by President George Bush, was a fabrication, and the girl was the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador. Before this could be publicly revealed, a special audio-visual presentation on Iraqi atrocities was given to the UN Security Council, just two days before Resolution 678 authorising the Gulf War was passed.

On an altogether different scale from the Kuwaiti government experience, but still an important part of the Gulf War, the presence of American, French and – as it happened – particularly British television cameras in northern Iraq, reporting on the plight of the Kurds in March 1991, helped precipitate the Western military humanitarian intervention known to the Americans as Operation Provide Comfort, while the much greater plight of the marsh Arabs of southern Iraq went unreported and unconsidered. This experience together with that of the Gulf War itself led to the argument that a cheap form of defence might be available to small countries and aspiring national groups by investing in resources to manipulate western – chiefly American – public opinion through the media and by other methods. In 1992-1993 in Cambodia, according to later analysis, the Khymer Rouge was able to generate the impression of a major famine and obtain external aid and support, in order to strengthen its own political position. In 1994 in Nicosia, an American political lobbyist publicly promised the Cypriot government that in return for an outlay of US\$150 million over three years he could *guarantee* a change in American policy leading to the unification of Cyprus (compared to a Cypriot defence budget of about US\$200 million a year). In 1992-1995, the Bosnian government succeeded in a sustained propaganda campaign to win over important members of the international news media in Sarajevo, as part of its broadly successful strategy to secure American military support. Finally, in December 1998 the Kosovo Liberation Army – the KLA – deliberately engaged in acts of terror against Kosovan Serbs in the hope of provoking a Serbian over-reaction for the benefit of the OSCE Kosovo Verification Mission and its accompanying media. When this over-reaction came next month in the form of the massacre of Kosovo Albanians by the Serbs at the village of Racak, the KLA even put the resulting pictures on the Internet.

The existence of ‘The CNN Effect’ has been closely studied and argued for almost a decade now. The major problem has been one of obtaining evidence, which largely consists of the views of those involved in the decision making process, often given after the event and off the record. Most politicians and senior decision makers deny the existence of ‘The CNN Effect’, but then few politicians are likely to admit to having been *unduly* influenced by the media; some, usually out of office, argue that it happens to

others. Most journalists believe in 'The CNN Effect', because they like to believe in their own influence and the importance of the media; indeed, with a perverse pride, some British journalists have argued that it should really be called 'The BBC Effect'. Senior military figures have on the whole supported the idea, sometimes paying a backhanded tribute to the media's ability to dictate to themselves and their forces. However, such criticism may perhaps be taken as code for criticism by the military of their political superiors: what is being blamed is not the media for doing their job, but the whole decision-making process.

Finally, there is the view that 'The CNN Effect' may be new and unfamiliar, but that it is either harmless or beneficial: all that is happening is the extension, through new communications technology, of democracy to the unfamiliar area of foreign and defence policy, which is entirely a healthy trend. This argument goes that there is nothing actually wrong with political leaders responding to public opinion as expressed through the media to take actions of which they hope the public will approve.

Assessing 'The CNN Effect' also means assessing its failures: circumstances in which the most intense reporting and visual imagery have entirely failed to produce a significant western military response. The most obvious, and most studied, cases have been the genocide in Rwanda in April 1994, and the continued fighting in Chechnya 1994-2000. Rwanda is a particularly interesting case in that the media effect, in so far as it has existed, has been indirect. The failure to respond effectively to a genocide left a number of Western political decision makers with a guilty conscience, and it has been other peoples under threat who have benefited from this: certainly in Kosovo. One further noteworthy finding regarding 'The CNN Effect' that in each successful case of a military deployment *apparently* arising from media reporting of a crisis, the response came from elite opinion rather more than popular opinion in the mass. There has not been as case yet of 'the people' marching through the streets demanding that the troops are sent in or that something must be done.

Summarising a great deal of analysis, if a consensus presently exists on 'the CNN Effect' it is as follows. First, that as part of the complex mixture of influences that accompany the decision of any government to use military force, the role of 24-hour global news reporting is the most recent factor, but by no means the only one. Much as for the effectiveness of economic sanctions, or for that matter an air bombing campaign, a great many other factors also have to be right as well, many of them rooted in traditional politics and strategy. Secondly, and consequently, 'The CNN Effect' in its *purest* form, of a direct and automatic causal relationship between media reporting of an overseas event and subsequent military action, resembles the Douhet hypothesis of strategic bombing in its purest form also, as an unverified and improbable set of beliefs. But that is no reason to dispense with either concept altogether, or to believe that weaker forms of the hypothesis do not have validity.

### **The CNN Defence?**

The issues involved are no less complex for the second scenario, that of the political leader of a country who seeks to manipulate the media in order to offset the effects of a Western air bombing campaign, and to avoid a consequent land assault. Anything said about this scenario must be more speculative than the first, since there have been only two examples in recent times: that of Saddam Hussein of Iraq in January 1991, and Slobodan Milosevic of Yugoslavia in March 1999, and the two cases contained significant differences. (A third possible example, Operation Deliberate Force against the Bosnian Serbs in 1995, remains shrouded in controversy and mystery, and had no

significant role for the media, except perhaps to register its failure.) It is presently hard to envisage such events taking place in which both the political pressure for military action and the main assets for the air campaign would not be provided by the United States. It is equally likely that other countries would provide aircraft and perhaps warships; and that the issue of the United States providing troops for a ground war might be in dispute. It seems fair to allow into this scenario an international news media that is dominated by the United States, that does not understand modern air campaigns, and that is inherently suspicious of any military pronouncements. At the risk of stating the obvious, the objective of such a political leader in this situation is to stay in power.

Air power theorists argue that in these circumstances the advantages lie overwhelmingly with the attacker: the shock and paralysis of a preliminary air and electronic strike, 'going for the head of the snake', is something from which a defender cannot recover. But reality does not always obey the lessons, and a number of advantages may lie with the defender. In the particular case of Kosovo, for political reasons the Nato air campaign began only gradually, and consequently the Yugoslav government and armed forces were able at first to dictate the pace of events to Nato to an unusual degree. This included using the national media over which they had *control*, and Western international media over which they had *influence*, to promote their own propaganda line of Nato bombs hitting civilian targets, while depriving Nato of supporting media evidence for the main justification for the bombing, that it had intervened to prevent the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo. Alastair Campbell, the British Prime Minister's press secretary, who was on loan to Nato at the time, confessed in a speech to the Royal United Services Institution in July 1999 that he and his fellows were simply unable 'to force this pictureless story onto the news agendas'.

Many Western countries, and the UN in particular, have based their media strategies on the idea that truth and honesty will overcome propaganda, only to see such strategies fail repeatedly in the 1990s, in Bosnia, Somalia and Rwanda in particular. Historians may hope that there is long-term validity to the idea that exposure to truth and knowledge makes for better citizens. But for many countries control of the media is simply an aspect of political power. The people are not asked to believe in government pronouncements (although they may wish to do so), only to believe that the pronouncements come from the government, which also controls the armed forces and the apparatus of a repressive state. The outstanding example of a successful western information campaign in the last decade has been I-For, the Nato implementation force in Bosnia in 1995, which came equipped not only with a well-organised and resourced plan, but with considerable military force and the mandate to use it.

Repeatedly, the political power manifest in control of national media has been important in enabling leaders of undemocratic states to survive serious but limited military defeats. One of the most persistent of Western illusions is that defeat for such a leader must automatically mean his political resignation or overthrow. In fact the one case of this in recent times was General Leopoldo Galtieri of Argentina after the 1982 Falklands conflict, who was hardly a typical example. From Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt in 1967 onwards, there has been a consistent pattern of such leaders successfully continuing in power, partly by using their own national media to deflect blame onto traditional hate-figures. It is not even unusual to gain prestige from a defeat, sometimes with the help of your enemies. It was an anonymous United States' senator who in June 1999 said of Nato's performance over Kosovo: 'we sent an elephant to crush a gnat; the gnat is not crushed, and the elephant is limping'.

The question here is whether it is possible to defend successfully against an air campaign, and to block a ground campaign, by use of the media as one aspect of a wider

political and military strategy. Putting that in a slightly different way, is it possible for a militarily weak and repressive country to use control of its own national media as a propaganda arm, together with influence over the international media, to affect Western – principally American – political and public perceptions in order to restrict, degrade or even halt a bombing offensive shortly after it has begun? This is a very important issue. Since the 1984 Weinberger doctrine at least, it has been an axiom of United States' foreign policy that its forces will not be committed to operations overseas without the support of the people and their representatives in Congress; a policy strengthened by PDD 25 in 1994.

Despite the absence of discussion in the open sources, there seems to be a belief or fear implicit among air power theorists and airmen themselves that such a media strategy might succeed, and this fear has been exploited by their enemies. Most importantly, it includes the vexed question of casualties to United States' aircrew, the belief that news of any losses, relayed through the media, would have an immediate and dramatic effect on public opinion back home. This has had a marked influence on air operations from the 1991 Gulf War, in which pilots were explicitly briefed that there was 'nothing worth dying for' over Baghdad; to 1999 with the decision that American aircraft would fly no lower than 15,000 feet over Yugoslavia during the Kosovo conflict, for their own safety. This is not to suggest that in either case (or the others that came between them) the air environment was 'safe' for the aircrew involved; simply that their greater safety was a priority.

This is 'The CNN Effect' at its most extreme, supported by memory of prisoners-of-war in Hanoi, and perhaps also of the 1979 Tehran hostage crisis. Again, there are obvious difficulties in any civilian theorist discussing the issue of military casualties; but such evidence as exists does not appear to support this belief. In particular, the use of captured aircrew to read prepared statements on television by the Iraqis during the 1991 Gulf War only enraged Western public opinion in favour of greater military action. The dilemma is that the only way to test the belief would be to take losses among the aircrew concerned. Even so, present policy may be pointed out as a very good example of how assumptions about how the media and public opinion *might* behave have had a major impact on an air campaign. It is like a dummy minefield – it is only as real as you think it is.

There is also much to be said against the view that public opinion – including the opinion of political elites – could suddenly reverse itself on the merits of military action. Any country's ruler who is a target for a United States' bombing campaign is likely to have already been a target for sustained vilification by the United States' media, often over a period of years; perhaps originally against the wishes of the government, as with Saddam Hussein before August 1990. Once a mass media context for such a leader and his behaviour – what some media theorists very appropriately call a 'frame' – has been established, then past experience suggests that it is extremely difficult to remove. After decades of effort, the political leaders and people of Palestine have still not entirely removed the media frame of reference for themselves as 'terrorists' that they acquired in the 1960s.

Any contact between such a political leader and the Western media therefore takes on what is called a 'reflexive' quality. Although ostensibly addressing Western public opinion, interviews or statements are timed as part of an overall political strategy and their contents aimed at demonstrating to his *own* people his political importance as a world statesman, and the rightness of his cause. During the Kosovo conflict, the only interview given by Slobodan Milosevic to Western journalists was an hour-long appearance on the Texas television station KHOU-TV on 21 April, timed to steal the



thunder of the Nato 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary speeches in New York, and from his very first answer he launched a sustained attack on Nato's media credibility.

Since credibility is a war aim for both sides, one of the most valuable assets for any defender against an air campaign is that bombs miss their targets, or do not hit what was expected to be there; if only as a matter of statistics, the most precise air attack if carried on long enough will cause civilian casualties. How well an attacker copes with this depends on how well he has analysed and prepared for his own probable mistakes, but the credibility of any country conducting a bombing campaign from a position of humanitarian intervention will always be a vulnerable one. A second example of an *assumed* belief in the media's power influencing an air campaign is the equally difficult case of controlled national media broadcasting overt hate propaganda. There were no protests when in January 1991 American air and missile attacks took Iraqi television and radio off the air at the start of the Gulf War, but since then attitudes appear to have changed. In late 1991, prior to the Bosnian declaration of secession from Yugoslavia, Bosnian Serbs captured television relay stations and re-tuned them to transmit their own propaganda, preparing the ground for the fighting that came later. The role of *Radio Milles Collines* in Rwanda in 1994 also seemed to show a very direct and clear link between the broadcasting of racial hate propaganda and subsequent violence; and the pattern has been repeated elsewhere since. Already in 1994, some Western theorists were calling for not only electronic jamming, but the physical destruction of such broadcasting facilities, particularly as they might have additional military uses. These arguments formed part of the context for Nato's controversial airstrike on the RTS Belgrade television centre on the night of 22/23 April 1999, just one night after Milosovic's interview with KHOU-TV. Whatever its wider motives, some of which may never be entirely known, for carrying out this airstrike, Nato gave up considerable political credibility for its wider position of humanitarian action and not deliberately targeting civilians. Again, the argument for targeting RTS Belgrade (which was only off the air for seven hours) was apparently based on the belief that its hate propaganda was having a direct and immediate effect on events in Kosovo itself.

## **Understanding the Media**

By way of a conclusion, if there is an overall theme to this discussion, it is that of the armed forces of democratic countries *understanding* the media, in all its forms; and also seeking to be understood. As it happens, in my own country of Great Britain a lot of work has been done, chiefly since the 1982 Falklands conflict, on understanding the military-media relationship. Also, and partly for historical reasons, the British media's relationship with its armed forces, although it is and should be adversarial, has not always been antagonistic. Commanders of the British contingent to the 1999 peacekeeping operation in East Timor have estimated that the ratio of journalists attached to British troops at some stages was approximately one-to-one, without serious trouble on either side. In February 2000 a closed-doors meeting of senior British officials and members of the national media took place, of which summaries have been published. This showed that on balance neither felt that in the Kosovo conflict the other had seriously violated any explicit or implicit agreements about their working relationship, although of course there were individual difficulties. But this is not to suggest or recommend a 'British model' of military-media relations for other countries, simply because the circumstances of history will always be different. What is now a constant of military operations is that, at a very fundamental level, the role of the media must be properly understood.