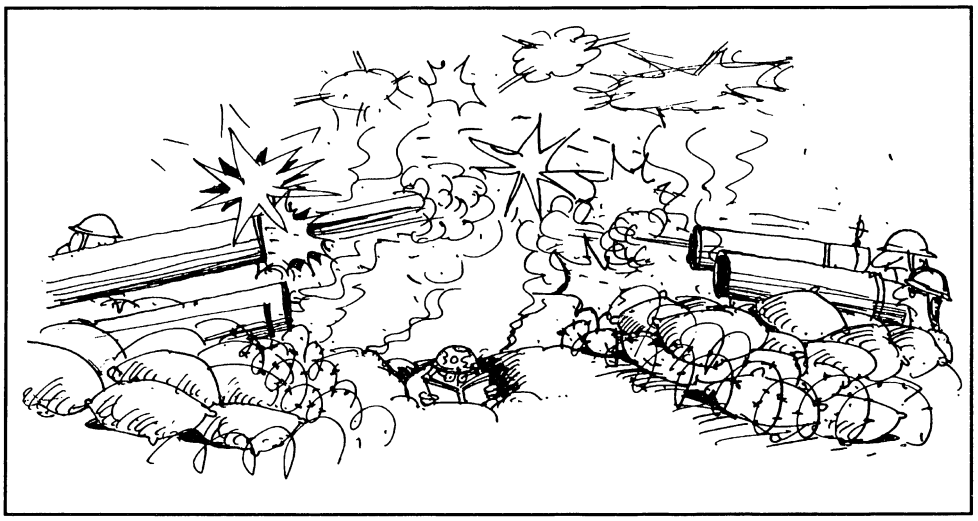
Under the gun

The media is losing the battle to inform the public about the military, according to a controversial new book. Richard Evans spoke to one of its authors.

'If people really knew, the war would be stopped tomorrow,' the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, said in December 1917. 'But of course they don't know and can't know. The correspondents don't write and the censor would not pass the truth.'

The view that the public can't be allowed to know what really happens during wartime is still prevalent in government and military circles. And according to a chilling new book, *The Media and the Military* by Peter Young and Peter Jesser, the media has been muzzled and manipulated with increasing skill and success over the past twenty years.



Indeed, it is arguable that the Gulf War was as badly reported as the First World War had been seven decades earlier.

Jesser and Young say of the Gulf conflict: 'Even the officially released, carefully sanitised and selected footage, such as the images shot through aircraft gun-cameras, was a distortion. In media terms, the war was reduced to little more than a high technology video game which never showed the bloody end results or failures. It might have been great television and grand theatre, and it might have delighted the government and the military, but it was not journalism. It was a new passive form of censorship and manipulation, more dangerous and more threatening to the public's right to know and the media's duty to inform than has ever been seen before.'

Peter Young, a veteran of the Malaya Emergency and the Vietnam War with considerable media experience, including with *The Australian* and the Ten Network, told *CU* the news media were in a near-hopeless position.

'The pendulum has swung so far, I really don't see much hope,' he said.

'The military is prepared and well resourced to handle the media during a conflict. The staff colleges all provide media training. There is a great emphasis on public relations in the army now. There is a public relations corps, just as there is a tank corps.

'Against this you have a media which is fragmented, competitive and ill-prepared. What makes it worse is that the media is starting to feel the pinch financially. They are not willing to put the resources into covering things more fully.

'Who is going to send someone up to northern Australia to properly cover a big exercise? It is much easier just to accept the footage the military provides of planes on a bombing run, and just add a voice-over.'

There were very few journalists who had a good understanding of the defence services, Mr Young said.

'Defence and foreign affairs tend to get lumped together, and if anything important happens with the military, it seems to be covered as the big political story of the day.

'We don't have the specialist reporters in defence issues any more. In any other important field – economics, sport, state politics, you name it – you have your specialist writers with real experience.

'Everyone has been a war reporter, of course. It seems to be the thing, to have been a war reporter. But there is no one who has the experience which lets them take a step back and look critically at what the military are saying.'

At the same time, the armed forces were developing cosy relationships with the media, through the accredited correspondent, or ACCOR, system which gave selected journalists honorary officer status, he said.

'Journalists tend to fall in love with the uniform. They are flattered by the brass pips and the officer status. They come to identify closely with the military.'

The Media and the Military argues that this is a serious problem, because the nature of war has changed. Since the creation of nuclear weapons, total wars of national survival have become impossible. In-

stead, nations protect their perceived interests through limited wars, often fought in distant places with little threat to the safety of civilians at home.

Despite this, Young and Jesser argue, 'social contract theory and the expectations under that theory which prevailed in wars of survival have not changed . . . current political theory has not progressed beyond the outdated argument that the state is pre-eminent in time of war or conflict. It is still held to be the natural duty of the citizen and the media to rally in the defence of what is claimed as the common interests of security and survival in any conflict'.

But when a war is not a struggle for national survival but an instrument of policy, as was the case with America's involvement in Vietnam, this expectation is likely to be disappointed, they say.

'In Vietnam, the well documented loss of popular support in the face of what became a protracted and increasingly unpopular war, while led by the media, was largely due to the exercise of people's freedom to decide matters of national security and foreign policy on their merits. This came as a shock to the government and military who entered the conflict still relying on an outdated social contract that promised the same automatic support for the national war aims in Vietnam that had been given so freely in the past'.

But the military learnt the lessons of Vietnam, argue Young and Jesser. If public support cannot be assumed in limited conflicts, it must be created by manipulating the media, especially by demonising a leader of the target nation: Saddam Hussain, Manuel Noreiga and Mohamed Aidid are notable examples.

And during the conflict itself, the media must be kept on the tightest possible leash: excluded completely in the early stages on grounds of 'operational security' and then heavily censored and controlled. This approach was first employed by the British during the Falklands War, adapted by the United States during its invasion of Grenada, honed further during the intervention in Panama, and reached a zenith during the Gulf War.

'There were no dead Iraqi soldiers,' a photo editor with Associated Press is quoted as saying. 'It was what we didn't get that bothers me . . . We had these massive tank battles, but I did not see a picture of an American tank being fired during the whole thing'.

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A report made by the media team from *US News and World Report* said: 'Disorganised, anarchic by nature and chronically competitive among themselves, the news reporters were no match for the machine of US Central Command and the Pentagon . . . Many reporters seethed with the knowledge that their coverage was inadequate. But they simply could not get to the story to cover it.'

The case studies in *The Media and the Military* show that media protests about exclusion are often overcame by appeals to patriotism. Margaret Thatcher, for example, responded to the BBC's questioning of official statements and coverage of the anti-war movement during the Falklands conflict by telling parliament: 'many people are very concerned indeed that the case for our British forces is not being put fully and effectively'. The *Sun* newspaper put it more strongly, with a headline referring to 'traitors at the BEEB'.

And while lies, deception and concealment by the government and the military have later been exposed, it doesn't seem to matter.

'Whoever wins the first round, that is what really counts,' Mr Young told *CU*.

'Later on, the conflict is not news any more. During the Iraqi war, the stories of the babies being thrown out of humidicribs was a classic example. That was completely without foundation, and was done very cynically to generate public support for military intervention in Kuwait. It was front page news at the time, but when the deception was revealed, that story was scarcely told in the mainstream press.'

Winning, and winning quickly, was the key element in the military's strategy, he said.

'If you have won, if it was a successful campaign, there is the tendency to go with whoever won the war.

'The thing that the military fears most is high casualties and a protracted conflict.

'If the conflict lasts for any length of time, the military are gone. Then media will have time to arrange independent coverage of events, obtain transport and independent communications and so on, and the public's interest in events will be sustained.'

The media needed to take action to improve its performance in reporting conflict, Mr White said.

'What we don't have is a proper independent industry forum to deal with media military issues in Australia.

'There is the Defence Media Advisory Group, but that is not independent. We need a "media industry defence issues association," or something of that sort.'

Such a group would be able to plan for a rapid and appropriate media response to a military crisis. Such improvement in media performance was vital, he said. 'At the moment, people don't know what is going on. The people whose right to know is being taken away are not aware of it.'

The Media and the Military: From Crimea to Desert Strike, by Peter Young and Peter Jesser, is published by Macmillan and costs $79.95 in hard back and $39.95 in paperback.