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Journalism and the Invasion of Grenada 30 years on: a retrospective

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Introduction

The thirtieth anniversary of the October 1983 US military invasion of Grenada provides an opportunity to examine the role of the media in covering these events. Far from contemporary forms of embedded journalism where reporters are attached to the armed forces gaining unique access to information and benefitting from special protection, reporters in Grenada were neither authorised nor welcomed to accompany the armed forces in its military adventure to the Caribbean islands. On the contrary, the Pentagon ordered that journalists should not be allowed to enter the island for two days following the US invasion. Even those who attempted to reach Grenada by boat were taken off the island, held for forty-eight hours and then released (Cassell, 1985:944). The US government excluded the press from the battlefield through an access denial which imposed a prior restraint based on the national security exception, that is, a government restriction on expression which is meant to be protected by the First Amendment, based on national security grounds (Pincus, 1987).

Grenada's invasion represents an important case study of journalism in the frontline because it marked a changing point in the relationship between journalists and the US administration. The exclusion of news organizations and independent journalists at the time can be conceived of as a test in trying new forms of information management. The tensions experienced between journalists, government and military officers signalled the need to come up with alternative solutions to the problem of information coverage in wartime.

Historical context

Thirty years ago the United States invasion of Grenada was a major international news story. The New York Times headlines of October 26th 1983 read, "1,900 U.S. Troops, with Caribbean Allies, invade Grenada and fight leftist units; Moscow protests; British are critical" (Worrill 2003). In retrospect the rhetoric used by President Reagan and his administration in dubbing Grenada, Cuba and Nicaragua as the "Caribbean Triangle", to justify the military actions, bears strong similarities to

the 'axis of evil' pronouncements of President George W Bush (Andersen, 2007) 'They imply a crucial connection without having to articulate or defend accusations that influential economic or political ties exist and have resulted in significant threat." (p. 123).

Why did the media blackout happen?

For the invasion of Grenada or 'Operation Urgent Fury' as it became known, there was a clear and organised plan to control the information about events committed by US forces (Naparstek, 1993; Schoenfeld, 1992). Following a US Department of Defense's order, reporters were not allowed to work from the island on the grounds of alleged safety reasons (Cassell, 1985:943). The New York Times reported in 1983 that: 'President Reagan said through a spokesman that reporters would be allowed onto the island when American military commanders determined that conditions were safe *for them'* (p. 1). The extent to which this was a legitimate statement became controversial: 'The argument about reporter safety is a weak one. Prior to Grenada, military conflicts were never considered too dangerous for the press to cover first-hand; members of the media have taken their chances on the battlefield numerous times and were prepared to do so again in Grenada without the guarantees of government protection' (Pincus, 1987:848)

The chronology of the events can be summarised as follows: on 25th October Operation Urgent Fury began; the following day reporters were prevented from coming to Grenada so news came only from ham radio operators in the island; on 27th fifteen pool reporters were allowed for several hours and escorted to the island by military officers; on the following day a larger number of reporters were allowed to the island; and finally on 30th permission was granted to all media (Cassell, 1985). Driving the two-day exclusion of the press from Grenada, was the US Government's reaction to potential press coverage that was perceived as threatening, together with their logistic needs to achieve military surprise, to concentrate on military objectives with no distraction from the press, and to have all troops available for the operation, that is, not occupied protecting reporters (Pincus, 1987:841-842).

The Financial Times reported in 1983 that 'the 300 journalists covering the events in Grenada are having to do so from the neighbouring island of Barbados' (Financial

Times, 1983: 6). Members of major news magazines, newspapers and TV channels were held captive by US forces at the Grantley Adams airport (Warden, 1988) until the military forces, five days after the beginning of the invasion, enabled journalists to gain access to the island (Cassell, 1985:944).

Despite the US administration's and commanders' argument that secrecy was required in order to minimize the risk of the military operation and American lives, there was a clear objective to manipulate and manage the news by allowing only Pentagon press agents to work from the island (Cassell, 1985). There were some allegations that the authorities disseminated inaccurate, misleading and distorted information, such as misinformation about the whereabouts of Navy ships (Pincus, 1987), failure to disclose details about the bombing of a civilian mental hospital, and the distortion about the nature of the invading force (Cassell, 1985). 'Because the Grenadian government had expelled virtually all Western reporters from the island one week before the invasion, the United States decision to exclude the press was a highly effective way of barring coverage of the operation' (Pincus, 1987:846).

The media blackout imposed during the Grenada invasion cannot be understood without considering the impact of the Vietnam War media coverage on the successive military actions during the decades that followed (Naparstek, 1993, Tumber, 2009).

Under the shadow of the memories of the Vietnam coverage, the Reagan administration was determined to apply strict information control. This was directly connected with the perception of a media bias against official policies and foreign US interventions. According to politicians and commanders, a direct cause of the demoralised audiences and opposition to foreign policies in Vietnam were the uncensored reporting and unrestricted access to information by the media. For Governments and military, the lesson of the Vietnam War was that the media and television in particular, was to blame for the United States defeat in South East Asia. Commanders and politicians were convinced that the years of uncensored reporting, unrestricted access, and the mismanagement of military briefings in Saigon were directly responsible for providing information and succor to the enemy, for lowering morale at home and for losing the battle for public opinion. It was a scenario that they believed must not be repeated in future conflicts. Since then they have experimented

with different methods of 'controlling' and 'managing' the media with stricter controls imposed on the media in order to contain information and ultimately win the battle for the hearts and minds of the public (Tumber, 2009).

The Reagan administration was determined to avoid the Saigon experience by imposing strict control on information that they perceived could change the minds of the public. Military and defense officials in the United States noted the experience of the Falklands. The uses of both military and civilian minders, the stationing of reporters in military units, and pooling arrangements were all adopted in various guises in future conflicts. The information policy adopted by the British Government and the military during the Falklands though was poorly organized and lacked planning. There was an absence of agreed procedure or criteria, no centralized system of control and no co-ordination between departments. But whatever seemingly 'on the hoof' measures the British introduced was based on the 'myth' of Vietnam.

Indeed the New York Times was clear about the link with the Falklands War. In an article headed "MILITARY VS. PRESS: TROUBLED HISTORY" the paper stated: 'The Reagan Administration's restrictions on news coverage of the invasion of Grenada has its immediate source in the military's resentment about broadcast and published reports on the Vietnam War. (...) no independent reporters were on hand to question the Army spokesmen (New York Times, 1983a).

During the Falklands conflict, the battle for public opinion was fought under the guise of 'operational security', an all-embracing term used as an excuse for delaying and censoring information and disseminating misinformation (see Morrison & Tumber, 1988, pp. 189-190). But whatever the outcomes of the reporting, it was not due to astute planning by the British. The news was controlled by the location of the Falklands. For the media it was in the wrong place. British journalists were only able to get their reports back through the military's communications network (see Morrison and Tumber, 1988; Tumber, 2009).

As the New York Times wrote within the same article: 'A former public relations officer said "the Falkland business gave us a useful pointer" on how a limited war operation might be handled. He noted that the British kept the number of correspondents with the task force down to a minimum and were discreet about the information they passed out. He said also that they actively censored pictures and dispatches going back to London. The difference between the Falklands and Grenada is that no reporters were allowed to land with the first wave of American troops' (New York Times, 1983a).

The blackout of press coverage of Operation Urgent Fury in October 1983 was part of a plan to evade the likely negative impact of military actions which may not have ended as initially expected (Sharkey, 2001). The lack of information about the location of the US medical students on the Island who supposedly were a main priority in the operation, the confusions about the enemy's identities, the killing of hospital patients by mistaking civilians for military targets, and the inadequate military equipment of troops in the ground[1] reinforced the application of the plan to control the flow of information.

By excluding journalists and independent film and television footage, the US administration secured the management and release of pictures thereby constituting the only evidence of the first two days of the Urgent Fury operation. The US audience could only receive what the Pentagon camera crews supplied. Film of warehouses appearing to be stacked with automatic weapons was used to verify claims over imminent terrorist threats coming from Grenada (Andersen, 2007). While hundreds of reporters were waiting in Barbados to gain access no independent journalists were in Grenada to corroborate the 'official' information. The US administration was so concerned with secrecy that Larry Speakes, the then White House press secretary was not informed about the invasion until shortly after it began (Campbell, 1989:28). In contrast local radios in Grenada had already warned about an imminent invasion to the island (Campbell, 1989:28). When Larry Speakes and the White House press officers were asked by journalists about this rumour, they promptly denied it. As a result, press officers were furious that they had not been informed and consequently

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[1] Soldiers had to use tourist maps instead of military ones to move across the island (Sharkey, 2001).

may have misled journalists. The Deputy White House Press Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Les Janka, resigned just after the Urgent Fury operation, arguing that the "credibility of White House press officials had been compromised. There were rumours that Speakes had discussed resigning over the matter, but Speakes denied this" (Campbell, 1989:30).

The media blackout in Grenada created a clear distrust among journalists. The New York Times of the 26th October 1983 headlined: **'REPORTING THE NEWS IN A COMMUNIQUE WAR'** and wrote: **'**Journalists, many sent recently to Bridgetown, Barbados, 150 miles from Grenada, have been unable to get firsthand confirmation of information on such matters as the extent of casualties in the invasion or the situation of United States students and tourists caught in the upheaval. (...) Supervising editors said they had faced the "communique war" situation before - in the war over the Falkland Islands last year, in the fighting between Iran and Iraq, and in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. They said those experiences made them particularly wary of efforts by a government to minimize reports of its casualties and maximize accounts of damage to enemy forces. " (Friendly, 1983).

The criticism continued with the New York Times the next day, 27th October, reporting: 'U.S. BARS COVERAGE OF GRENADA ACTION; NEWS GROUPS PROTEST' - 'Howard Simons, managing editor of The Washington Post, said: "I'm screaming about it because writing letters takes too long. I think a secret war, like secret government, is antithetical to an open society. It's absolutely outrageous." (...) Seymour Topping, managing editor of The New York Times, said, "We have strenuously protested to the White House and the Defense Department about the lack of access to the story in Grenada by our correspondents who are waiting on Barbados. We also are disturbed by the paucity of details about the operation released by the Pentagon at a time when the American people require all the facts to make judgments about the actions of our Government" (Gailey, 1983).

The press criticism of the Reagan administration's policy continued. On the 28th October the New York Times stated: 'THE GRENADA INVASION - Furor rages as U.S. hobbles press coverage' and wrote: 'WASHINGTON - The Reagan Administration permitted a pool of reporters to go to Grenada for the afternoon

yesterday as a furor continued over the limitations imposed on news coverage of the invasion of the Caribbean island. (...) The Administration's assertion that it had not permitted reporters to go to the island, where a military operation by United States and Caribbean forces continued for a third day, until military commanders had determined that it was safe for them, was sharply criticized in both Congress and the media. (...)(New York Times, 1983b).

Unsurprisingly, the exclusion of the media and the lack of response to journalists' logistic needs provoked an outcry from news organizations. As a result, an open conflict with these organisations and a controversy about the media blackout were installed in the public domain (Schoenfeld, 1992). The official decision, to bar reporters, affecting media coverage was contested by news organisations who severely criticised the Government using editorial complaints and a lawsuit (Cooper, 2003). The former appeared in The New York Times and The Times, among others, during the week that followed the invasion, emphasising the right to free speech and public access to information.

'The American Society of Newspaper Editors said the restrictions on coverage imposed by the Reagan Administration "go beyond the normal limits of military censorship." Jerry Freidheim, executive vice-president of the American Newspaper Publishers Association, said the limitations were "unprecedented and intolerable," and asked that Congress investigate what he called a "policy of secret wars hidden from the American people." (...)The Reagan Administration's policy on coverage has caused considerable consternation and suspicion among editorial writers and commentators. "The Reagan Administration has produced a bureaucrat's dream," said John Chancellor of NBC news. "Do anything, no one is watching".' (New York Times, 1983b)

The lawsuit (Flynt v. Weinberger, 1994) claimed violation of the First Amendment in the exclusion of reporters from Grenada, but was finally dismissed by the court for being considered 'moot' (Cassell, 1985:948; Cooper, 2003). The general public seemed to back the official decision of denial of press access, as the letters to NBC running ten-to-one against admitting the press showed (Cassell, 1985:945). However

the US commanders and politicians had to respond to the fundamental right of the public to be informed.

The mistrust of the administration by the media was sealed despite reporting access eventually being established.

How was the blackout possible?
The geo-location of Grenada played an important role in the media blackout. In the 1980's the existing technologies required an infrastructure which was restricted by its cost, accessibility and scope. Grenada was not as remote as the Falklands Islands, in which the difficulties of transporting and accessing means for broadcasting information generated important barriers for war correspondents.

Today, the Internet and mobile personal satellite communications systems enormously increase the possibilities of accessing information. 'Technology shapes the tone and substance of the military-press relationship. Technology is at the root of many of the military's security concerns about news coverage' (Seib, 2004: 47). The 2011 Arab Spring showed that nowadays it is possible to access alternative sources of information without being in the frontline (Zimmer, 2011). If we consider these new technologies, a complete media blackout as occurred in Grenada is much more difficult to imagine. However, in 1983 the only chance that journalists had to independently access information was by being on the island. The transportation requirements and the American Navy's capacity to monitor a couple of relatively small islands made the access to Grenada impossible without military authorization. Similarly, the use of digital technologies eliminates the duration of the conflict as a variable to be considered in the possibility of broadcasting relevant information. Back in 1983 a very short military intervention could create a challenge for news organization lacking military support, nowadays the widespread 'real-time communication capabilities have made war a far more transparent enterprise than military officials have been accustomed to' (Seib, 2004: 48). In view of high-tech weaponry and global communication, the conflict between the opposing interests of the press and the military, that is, the press' need to inform the public and the military's obligation to conduct war effectively is likely to persist (Cooper, 2003).

Media Operations and Governmental strategies

Media coverage of war and conflict has been commonly understood as a facilitator of a public arena in which the media inform the public about the events taking place in the battlefield (Taylor, 1997). When the invasion of Grenada took place, the Falklands War had recently taken place and the Pentagon looked at British information management as an example from which lessons could be learnt. Government and military censorship and information management could be applied by restricting access to the frontline. Images that could upset the audience and unfavourable reports that could be read could be avoided. This approach was materialized in the decision to exclude journalists from accessing the island in the two days following the invasion thereby imposing strict control over independent information about the US activities in Grenada. Journalists trying to arrive at the island by their own means were threatened with the use of naval and air force armament (Warden, 1988).

The Sidle Panel and Report

The establishment of a Media-Military Relations Panel appointed by the Pentagon and chaired by General Winant Sidle (between 6-10 February 1984 in Washington DC) (Office of Assistant Secretary of Defence, 1984) was the government's response to the intense criticism of the reporting restrictions and the tension that developed between the media and the US authorities during the Grenada conflict. The main goal of the Commission was to find a way to manage media operations and establish relations with news organisation in future military interventions. Sidle was asked to look at how the United Sates should conduct military operations in a manner that safeguards the lives of its military and protects the security of the operation while keeping the American public informed through the media (Office of Assistant Secretary of Defence, 1984:6).

The major news organizations decided that although they would cooperate fully with the panel they would not provide members to the Commission, as it was not deemed appropriate for media personnel to serve on a government panel. Instead the non-military membership of the panel was composed of experienced retired media personnel and representatives of schools of journalism who were experts in military-

media Relations. The Department of Defence organizations involved agreed to provide members from the outset' (Office of Assistant Secretary of Defence, 1984:6).

In preparation for the hearings, news media organizations and professional journalists were sent a letter querying their concerns. 'The letter included nine questions to be used by the commission. Formulated by General Sidle, the questionnaire asked media organizations their views on censorship, the First Amendment, the use of press pools to cover military operations, accreditation of report for media pools, and logistical needs of the different media' (Campbell, 1989:65).

The majority of the nineteen media representatives who testified before the committee requested a return to the procedures that existed prior to the Grenada invasion whereas the military members of the panel were looking to develop more formal procedures for media coverage of combat operations. The main issue that emerged from the various testimonies of both military and media personnel was one of trust. With some military officers suspecting the medias' ethics and patriotism and some members of the press suspecting the military of censorship not only for security considerations but also for political purposes.

The Sidle panel recommended: integration between military, public affairs and operational planning; large pooling system; assessment of the need to pre-establish accredited journalists in case of military operations; journalists' compliance with security guidelines; adequate equipment and training for military staff to help media coverage; provision of communication facilities and transportation when these do not compromise military operations; and better communication and understanding between military and media workers ((Sidle, 1984, pp. 166-167, as cited in Woodward, 1993, p. 9; see also Cassell, 1985). Journalists and their access to the frontline, then, would be coordinated in accordance with the military activities supervised by the US commanders. 'Media representatives that appeared before the Sidle panel were against the pooling arrangements in general, but they agreed that such arrangements could be necessary for them to obtain early access to an event. This sort of arrangement would be used only when the number of media personnel allowed on an operation were limited because of security of logistics' (Campbell, 1989:67).

These proposals were implemented during the operation to maintain freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf in 1988 (known as Operation Earnest Will). The US military involvement in Panama (1989) provided the first opportunity to test implementation of the Sidle Panel's recommendations (Olson, 1992: 522). This latter operation proved a disaster for the 'new' pooling system because Dick Cheney, then Secretary of Defense, obstructed the mobilization of the pool and journalists were unable to cover the engagement. Local commanders demanded changes in stories and delays in passing dispatches through military channels (Woodward, 1993, pp. 9-10). The sixteen-member press pool arrived in Panama four hours after US troops invaded and were only allowed to send their first reports after ten hours.

The delay in the media's ability to gain access and report independently – and in the case of Grenada days rather than hours - enables Governments and Military to set the terms not only of the initial coverage and debate but of all subsequent treatment of the story. These administration spokesmen become the primary definers of topics enabling them to establish the initial definition or primary interpretation of the conflict in question. The interpretation then 'commands the field' in all subsequent treatment setting the terms of reference within which all further coverage takes place. Although the strength of this 'effect' is disputed, news source analysis would suggest that prior to the advent of user generated content, it had a strong degree of efficacy (see Hall et all., 1978:58-59, see also Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994: 17).

General Sidle was critical of the exercise and the manner in which his recommendations were implemented. Further discussions between military commanders and news organizations followed the Panama fiasco and eventually led to all future battle plans containing a section on dealing with the media. To some extent, this worked reasonably well in the military engagements in Somalia in the early nineties and in Haiti in 1994 although the pool system remained unpopular with the news organizations (Tumber, 2009).

In the Gulf War I (1991) organized pools and formal briefings were the order of the day. Journalists were restricted in their travel movements and had to subject their copy to formal security review. To overcome the problem of how to cope with hundreds of journalists reporting from the region, the military organized ad -hoc press pools. However many journalists decided to ignore these pools preferring to move about independently. The outcome was frustration on behalf of news organizations and continuing bewilderment on behalf of the military about how journalists operate (Tumber 2009).

Military - media relations went through a further downturn during the Kosovo campaign in 1999, a conflict where journalists had little access to the province and relied on the military for information about the bombing campaign. For the invasion in Afghanistan (2001), many editors, bureau chiefs, and correspondents regarded the Pentagon's reporting rules as some of the toughest ever (see Hickey, 2002). The main grievances consisted of the lack of reasonable access to land and sea bases from which air attacks on Taliban positions were launched, and the restrictions on access and information emanating from the Pentagon.

The mythical legacy of Vietnam was still alive in the recent Iraq War (2003) with apprehension on the part of the military and government that the public would react badly to pictures of casualties. 'Commanders and politicians were anxious about the effects of displays of bloodied bodies of civilians rather than ones of 'precision strikes on legitimate targets', or the media reproduction of photographs showing Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib being abused by American guards as occurred in April 2004. In the US, there remains a particular fear that body bags containing dead servicemen from Iraq or Afghanistan can sap domestic support for the war. This explains why the US military transported home in secrecy the bodies of those killed while on duty, with no photographs allowed throughout 2003-4, and also explains the military's acute embarrassment when pictures were obtained by newspapers of flag-draped coffins in a cargo plane' (Tumber 2009).

The Sidle commission can be viewed as highly influential because it was an attempt not just to placate the press but also to develop a blue print for working relationships between the military and media enabling both parties to achieve their relative aims.

Media coverage plans and procedures in the Iraq War can be seen as a developed plan initiated by the Sidle commission (see Tumber & Palmer 2004:2). Journalists need to be accredited and assembled by the military. This creates a mechanism to facilitate the relationship with the military forces, but it can also exclude unfriendly journalists from areas considered inappropriate by these forces (Andersen, 2007). Safety and training courses in preparation for the impending invasion and the embedded journalism experience may create greater sympathy with US troops.

Conclusion

Grenada was the zenith of media control operations following the lessons of the Falklands War. These types of operation are not possible any longer because of the multiple channels allowing users to generate and distribute content. Although journalists and news organisations may still find different obstacles in accessing information (as they are in the current conflict in Syria), digital technologies have generated new possibilities for producing and broadcasting information that can overcome some of these barriers. From mobile phones with cameras to very popular blogs and real-time devices, Internet connections have enabled myriad possibilities for information to be produced and circulated to journalists' and non-journalists' networked connections.

Despite the changes in technology the management of domestic public opinion compels Governments and military into careful planning, rehearsal and management of information from and about any war or conflict. They have to combine methods of ensuring a continuous stream of positive media coverage that is ostensibly freely gathered by independent journalists and news organizations. The media policies adopted during the invasion of Grenada failed to do this showing that censorship and the denial of access diminished the free media claim of the United States and, as illustrated by the media's coverage and comment, and confirmed by the Sidle panel during the session and discussions held with military officers and several members of the press, undermined the persuasiveness of what the Government and military reported.

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