

4 The latest casualty: Phillip Knightley on media failure

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HE COVERS the coverage of wars and the fine borderline that journalists might cross to become propaganda merchants: World War II, Vietnam, The Gulf, Kosovo, to name a few, and now the 'War on Terror'. And the performance so far of the news media in this latest one has left Phillip Knightley, author of *The First Casualty*, underwhelmed: civil rights down the drain, public debate and dissent stifled, the news media hardly batting an eyelid. 'Well, the press in Britain, Australia, and probably New Zealand, did a better job than their American counterparts,' he sighs, 'but that's not saying much.'

Knightley is one of only two people to be twice named Journalist of the Year in Britain (the other is fellow-Australian John Pilger). His definitive *The First Casualty* (1976), which examines the nature of war correspondence and propaganda, is freshly reprinted with an extra section on the Gulf War and Kosovo (2000). 'And if I'd hung on a bit longer I could have had 9/11 in there as well.'

Knightley knows full well that the job of war correspondance is not an easy one, for journalists or for their news organisations. What surprises him is that in the 'War on Terror', Government, military and media behaviour has been so similar to previous conventional wars: the demonisation of enemy leaders, the dehumanising of enemy populations, all of the essential tools of propaganda. 'The reporting of the war on terrorism is back to the level of the First World War,' he argues, 'permeated by propaganda and atrocity stories, with journalists relying on official information because they can find out little themselves... we turn on CNN or the BBC and there is an American general at the Pentagon telling us what they have decided we should know about the war.'

But, as in the build up to the World War II, when news coverage of the rise of fascism was woefully inadequate, so in this ‘war’ has in-depth foreign coverage and analysis of its causes been lacking. Americans and other Western populations were not informed of what other parts of the world were thinking about them and their governments. The vaunted ‘why do they hate us so much?’ discussion didn’t, and has still not, taken place.

‘American journalists — even academia — have chosen self-censorship over the First Amendment. It’s strange, and ironic, that they have always been able to wave freedom of speech in the faces of all of us not lucky enough to enjoy the same guarantees, and yet at the very moment it is most necessary to use it, they appear to have put it on ice for the duration of the war.’

Knightley, 74, has just flown in from London to Hong Kong to speak at the international Journalism Education Association (JEA) conference, this year focused on the challenges of covering international news in the new century. The city is buried in cloud, with only a glimpse of the outlines of tall buildings and mountains. Adding to the vaguely oppressive atmosphere, the hotel coffee is NZ\$10 a bad cup. Hard for a jetlagged pensioner to stay upbeat, you might imagine, but Knightley, slight and dapper, is wide awake, his owl-like round eyes, enhanced by matching specs, alert and slightly disconcerting.

More than anything, he warns, the press must be watchful. ‘Our leaders have nearly convinced us that uncivilised behaviour in defence of our civilisation is justified, that civil liberties must take second place when our liberty is under threat, that for journalists to question the war or dissent from the way it is conducted is unpatriotic, anti-American or even - believe it or not - anti-semitic. These are important matters and our media should be leading the discussion of them.’

Instead, he says, the debate has too often been reduced to abuse, attacks and intimidation forcing commentators and intellectuals to be ‘cowed into silence’.

He cites examples of ignored stories in the States — the 1200 people ‘held on suspicion’ after September 11 with 548 still being held six weeks later. While only 12 had possible ties to terrorism, the rest were guilty only of visa or traffic infringements, ‘and being Muslim’. One 55-year-old Pakistani man, detained while trying to return home, actually died after six weeks without communication with relatives, a lawyer or the outside world. Another spent ‘two months in solitary with round-the-clock fluorescent lights.’

Knightley says the American media would ‘in normal times’ have enthusiastically tackled these outrages. ‘But for months they cause not a ripple of

concern because no journalist wanted to risk being labelled a terrorist sympathiser.’

He doesn’t expect the situation to improve either, mainly because of current journalistic standards. ‘This is a war without fronts ... and how do you cover that?’ The news media, he says, are on notice from the US military that they are just as likely to be bombing targets if they try to report any from behind ‘enemy lines’. ‘The military want to assemble them in nice little safe areas where they can tell them what they need to know.’

This just reinforces the media’s already advanced case of self-absorption. ‘There’s going to be a ratings war,’ he predicts, ‘just like the Gulf, and one journalist I spoke to says he’ll have to do six uplinks [live interviews] per hour, leaving him no time to actually do the job of reporting. Just like now, head office will inform the reporter in the field who’ll report it all back again. These broadcasters think they are just going to set up the cameras in Iraq like some Hollywood movie!’

Not a ‘veteran war correspondent’

Knightley can claim many things in journalism. He was the first and last journalist to interview Kim Philby — espionage is another of his fields. He was one of the *Sunday Times*’ original Insight team which uncovered the Thalidomide scandal. But what he is not, he is quick to point out, despite erroneous labels, is a ‘veteran war correspondent’.

‘I’ve only covered one, and I was a miserable failure,’ he laughs. Spectacular, as it turns out. Part of a “huge team” sent by the *Sunday Times* to cover what would turn out to be the Seven Day War in Sinai, Knightley was sent to Cairo, while another team went to Jerusalem. In the long slow build-up to nothing much happening his attempts to get near the desert area of potential action saw his arrest and return to Cairo. So, he says, he interviewed all the right people in high office, the diplomats, the UN, the military, who all said the same thing — there wasn’t going to be a war.

‘And so I filed my report, which was published, with the upshot that the newspaper recalled us all to London. I filed on one day in June, and the next day, as we were all on different planes heading home, the war began. The Jerusalem team had to turn round at London and go out again, but our team couldn’t get back in. When I walked into the office, the atmosphere was decidedly frigid.’

The story still cracks him up. He left the *Sunday Times* in 1985, ‘when the decay set in with Rupert Murdoch’, and is proud to say that he didn’t cross a

picket line then and he never has. He's always been proud to be a socialist, or 'pinko steeltrap' as one Australian newspaper branded him recently. Indeed, the 'disgraceful' Australian episode of the Tampa refugees seriously tempered a renewed love for his homeland, forged while writing his latest book, *Australia — a Biography*.

Knightley now lives in cosmopolitan Notting Hill, the London suburb he first settled in on arrival in Britain as a young journalist. He spends a few months a year in Sydney and another couple in India where his wife is from. His accent now is cultured, almost languidly British, rather hilariously reminiscent of the traditional military types he quotes.

He understands the patriotic and journalistic tensions set up during wartime, and the temptation for journalists to support their country to the detriment of their profession. 'But you don't report lies,' he says, 'because if you do then you should be a propagandist instead.' The roles of propagandist and reporter, he says, were clearly delineated in the Second World War. Now, however, the military and governments are ruthlessly organised to disinform, while news organisations still seem unprepared for the propaganda onslaught.

'It's depressingly predictable,' he says. 'This is going to be a war for and against information, but the authorities have the whole area of psychological manipulation well developed. It's so subtle and so clever, and in many cases has the help of ex-journalists who have taken the walk of shame into PR, along with newsrooms which operate on a herd instinct, that frankly I don't know what to do about it.'

References

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