

'The Afghanistan Conflict: Australia's Role'

Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies
ANU College of Arts and Social Sciences
Australian National University
22-23 October 2009

Panel discussion on the role of the media
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Good afternoon and thank you. As it's been a long and rather intense two days here and we are at the tail end of the conference, I will keep my presentation mercifully brief. And in company such as this, I feel the need to preface my talk by saying I am no expert on Afghanistan. My area of expertise, such that it is, is in the Indonesian militant group JI and its involvement in terrorist attacks such as the Bali bombings, about which I wrote a book in 2004. I have also done a lot of work on the Australians who have joined the global jihadist movement, one of whom was the subject of my second book, published in May.

In the course of my work I have made only one trip to Afghanistan, to research my second book, which is partly set in Kabul and Kandahar. I was in Kabul in July last year. When I was there it didn't seem a particularly dangerous place to be, notwithstanding the heavy military presence, the fortifications, sandbags, bunkers, and army of private security firms. At that point, the war seemed to be safely outside the capital. That changed a few days after I left with the bombing of the Indian embassy in the city which, when I look back now, seems to have presaged the full-blown Taliban resurgence. It's a reminder to me of how dramatically the situation has deteriorated in the year or so since then.

I have confined my thoughts today to the military effort in Afghanistan, rather than the reconstruction effort, not only because, as Professor Danspeckgruber observed, we in the media are purely interested in bad news and the war stuff is the 'sexy side' of the story – which is true, admittedly – but because Amin invited me to speak today on the subject of 'Australian media coverage of the Afghan conflict and public opinion'.

I did a quick review of the media coverage of the war before I came. Here's a few examples:

‘Rudd praises diggers in Afghanistan’. That’s a headline from the Brisbane Times earlier this week.

‘Diggers fed on diet of gruel’. That was the one about Australian soldiers grumbling about the food in the Dutch canteen at Tarin Kowt.

‘Diggers build bridges, hospitals’.

‘True blue Aussie Anzac Diggers all round good blokes’. Actually I made that one up, but you get the general flavour.

I confess this is not a scientific sample. But these examples do nonetheless illustrate my point, which is that, given that Afghanistan is perhaps *the* – or certainly a – central foreign policy question of the moment, I believe we have had surprisingly little incisive and illuminating media coverage and debate of the issues there. What we are getting is mostly a re-run of the American debate, as though we don’t need to have a discussion and a position of our own, and lots of stories about ‘our Diggers’.

As you may have gathered, the use of the term ‘Diggers’ is a particular bugbear of mine. The problem is that referring to Australian troops in those terms casts a warm rosy nostalgic glow over the Afghan campaign, in which it is implicit that to question or criticise the mission would be somehow un-Australian. I don’t say this to demean or detract from the very difficult job that Australian forces are doing in Afghanistan. But we need to have a sensible, hard-headed, self-interested debate about it, and language like that doesn’t help.

The role of the Australian media in covering the Afghan conflict is *not* to report on the building of bridges and hospitals by Australian troops in Oruzgan province. There’s room for that, of course, but it’s not our central role. Our role is to ask the hard questions, the same questions you are here to discuss.

Why are we there?

What is the objective?

If we are unsure of that - beyond some woolly concept of achieving peace, stability and democracy for the long-suffering Afghan people - then what are we doing there?

Are we there to ‘save Afghanistan’ – to quote Senator Trood earlier today?

If so what does that mean?

Are peace, stability and democracy achievable goals in Afghanistan?

Do the Afghan people *want* democracy?

Is the hope of Western style democracy in Afghanistan perhaps entirely futile?

Can al Qaeda be defeated in Afghanistan? Is *that* the objective?

Can it be defeated without defeating the Taliban?

These are just a few of questions we in the media should be asking.

So why are we not having more serious discussion of these questions?

There are a number of reasons. I'm always happy to put my hand up and do a *mea culpa* on behalf of the media and say that generally we don't do a very good job on serious issues. The news media in general – certainly in Australia – is better at covering the trite, the banal, than the serious issues of the day, particularly foreign policy issues.

There are very few Australian journalists actually in Afghanistan at any given time. Covering Afghanistan is dangerous and costly, and media organisations are far more cautious these days about sending reporters into life-threatening conflicts, particularly since the deaths of journalists in Iraq.

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) has not made it any easier. For a journalist, getting access to the conflict zone in Afghanistan to cover the war and the involvement of Australian troops in it is much more difficult than it is for journalists from the US or Britain, for example, and the ADF is far more restrictive than its counterparts in facilitating journalists, which is a source of ongoing frustration.

In what was supposed to have heralded a new approach on this score, the ADF recently hosted three journalists in Afghanistan; a reporter from the ABC and a journalist and photographer from News Limited. It was an experiment in embedding, which had not previously been done by the ADF in Afghanistan. It was partly done to address the frustrations expressed by media outlets over the lack of access, although the ADF clearly had a different agenda from the media, a spokesman commenting at the time that the reason the ADF had embarked on the trial was because it felt there had been too many stories on 'the trauma' of the exercise, and not enough on 'the pace of reconstruction and the progress that has been made.'

The trial was apparently regarded by Defence as a success, because the ADF told the ABC's Media Watch program it was 'extremely pleased with the volume and general quality of reporting that the embedded journalists produced.' I assume that means there were plenty of stories on Diggers building bridges and hospitals.

But for the journalist it was an exercise in frustration. During a month with the Australian troops, they were only allowed on three patrols 'outside the wire'. They said their movements were 'tightly controlled' and they got little genuine access. Their defence minders insisted on vetting at least some of their stories before they were filed. One of the stories the ABC's Sally Sara covered was the shooting by Australian soldiers of two Afghan policemen. She was prevented from filing that story for several hours, because someone decided the story shouldn't be made public until the Minister had had a chance to talk about it in parliament. The ADF later put out an incorrect media statement saying the policemen had not been wearing uniforms, which was subsequently revealed on the Lateline program to be untrue.

The News Limited journalist Ian McPhedran submitted a report on the exercise afterwards to ADF top brass. Among other things he commented that:

'Having military personnel trying to sell stories about schools or bridges or hospitals, when the real story is outside the green zone with the infantry patrols, simply wastes valuable time and generates major frustrations... 'Soft' PR stories about diggers doing good works have a place, and that place is the Army News newspaper or on the defence website, not in the pages of major metropolitan newspapers.'

The ADF had justified its restrictions on the grounds of protecting the journalists' safety, to which McPhedran commented that 'denying access bcs something might be dangerous defeats the purpose of the exercise'. He described the trial as a 'lost opportunity'.

An academic at Monash University, Kevin Foster, has been studying the ADF's media relations policy. He told the ABC's Media Watch:

'The war is being reported in this way because the ADF wants to exercise absolute control over every aspect of the news production process.' He says that in pursuit of a 'seamless PR message', the ADF's media minders 'disdain the public's right to reliable, objective information' and

‘miss out on countless opportunities for the presentation of a positive portrayal of the troops doing their jobs’.

If the ADF’s aim through this strategy is to ensure the public takes a more benign view of its mission in Afghanistan, then perhaps it’s having the desired effect. A recent ANU poll tells us that a narrow majority of Australians – 53% - support the involvement of Australian troops in Afghanistan. That compares with 39% who oppose it and 8% who don’t know. The figures show there are more people strongly against Australia’s involvement than strongly in favor of it, suggesting the approval meter could easily shift if there were significant casualties or setbacks.

Interestingly, the figures *also* show that a large majority – 69% - believe the US and its allies are losing the war, as against only 17% who believe they – or we – are winning. I find it curious that Australians continue to support a war they can see we are losing, and wonder why that is. Perhaps it’s because we have so few troops on the ground, compared with the Americans, or because we have had proportionally fewer come home in body bags. Maybe Australians think that being in Afghanistan is keeping us safe from terrorism. Maybe they are comforted by the general tenor of the media coverage – ‘diggers building bridges and hospitals’ - allows people to feel a warm inner glow over what our troops are doing there.

A more rigorous, incisive media coverage and debate on the Afghan conflict would *not* ensure greater public support for Australia’s involvement. Indeed it might have the opposite effect of undermining that support and intensifying public disaffection with the war – and I use that term notwithstanding Prof Danspeckgruber’s assertion that it is not a war but an ‘armed development issue’.

There is evidence that the much greater freedom allowed to American journalists covering the conflict by the US armed forces has contributed to the diminished public support. That is the risk you take if you want to have a sensible, informed, intelligent debate. That was the risk the US military took when it allowed the Australian freelance journalist Stephen Dupont unfettered access while he was embedded with the US army four years ago.

The result, you will recall, was shocking footage of the bodies of two Taliban fighters, killed and set on fire by American soldiers, and laid out so they faced Mecca. Those images certainly did nothing to enhance

popular support for the war, but they did enhance an informed public debate about the reality on the ground.

If we want to have that sort of debate then the key actors in the conflict – and the reconstruction – have to play a role in facilitating it, rather than blocking it. I don't want to let the media off the hook. We too have a responsibility to make the far greater effort that's involved in serious, informed, insightful coverage, rather than the trivia we so often focus on.