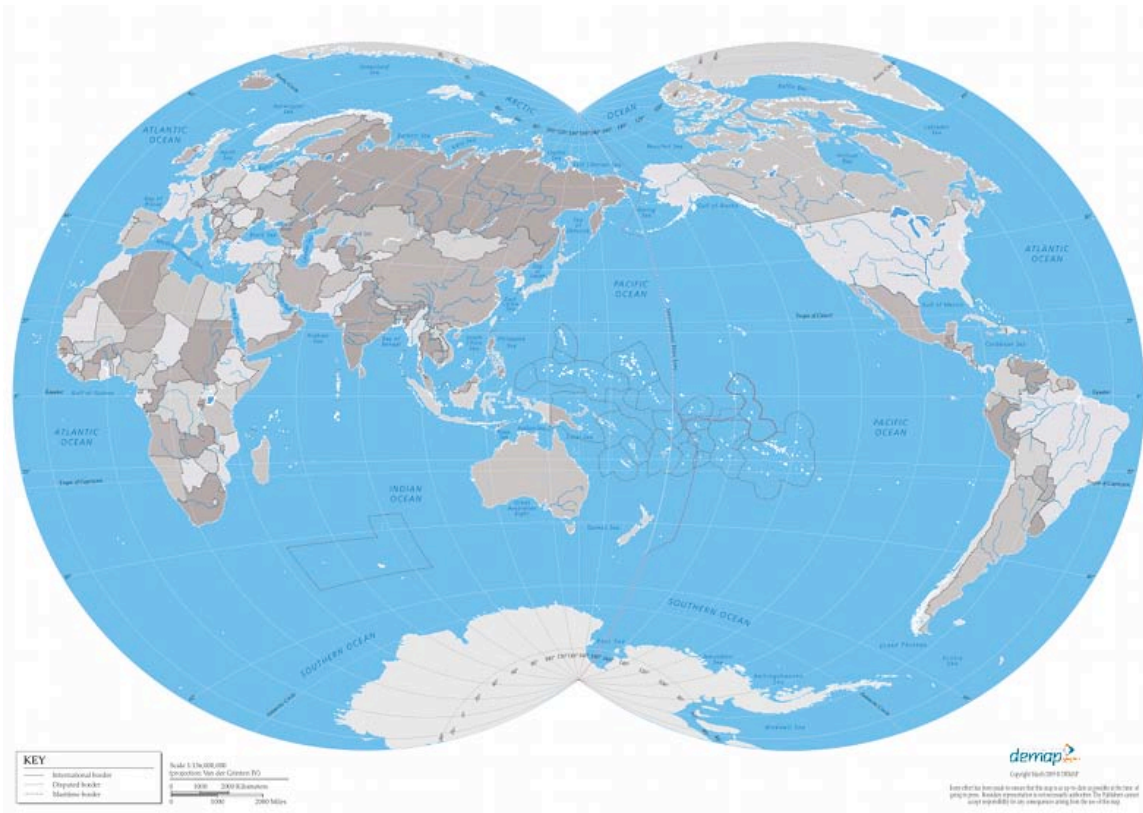




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Mendicants and manipulators: the ADF, the media and the reporting of Australia's war in Afghanistan



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Synopsis

Kevin Foster of Monash University writes that in its Afghanistan operations the Australian Defence Force “evidently regards the media as a threat to the smooth running of its public affairs operation and as a consequence they are brought into the process only at the point of dissemination when newspapers and television networks transmit the material gathered for them by the military.” In Australia, Foster concludes, “the media need the military far more than the military need them. As a consequence they have no leverage in their dealings with the military. Reduced to a state of virtual mendicancy they are grateful for whatever scraps of ‘news’ the ADF casts their way. In this context it is clear that much of what is presented to the Australian public as ‘news’ about its forces in Afghanistan is little more than ADF PR purposed not to tell us what is actually happening but to promote its version of what we are doing there and why.”

About the Author

Kevin Foster is Head of Communications and Media Studies in the School of English Communications and Performance Studies at Monash University. He has written widely on national identity and the cultural history of war. His publications include a study of the cultural politics of the Falklands War, *Fighting Fictions: War, Narrative and National Identity* (London: Pluto, 1999), (Ed.) *What are we doing in Afghanistan? The Military and the Media at War* (Melbourne: ASP, 2009) and *Lost Worlds: Latin America and the Imagining of Empire* (London: Pluto, 2009). He is currently developing a research project comparing Australia’s military-media relations with those of its coalition allies in Afghanistan and exploring the factors that have made them so different. He is also writing a long overdue book about British film director Ken Loach.
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Mendicants and manipulators: the ADF, the media and the reporting of Australia's war in Afghanistan

In early March 2009 four reporters from the *Age*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Sky News*, accompanied troops from the Australian Defence Force (ADF) on patrols in the area surrounding the Australians' base outside Tarin Kowt in Uruzgan Province, southern Afghanistan.¹ While the patrols were entirely routine what made them notable was that in the six years since the ADF had first arrived in Afghanistan this was the first occasion on which it had reporters embedded with it as its troops moved beyond the wire. By contrast, British, US, Canadian and Dutch journalists have been embedding with their forces in Afghanistan either from the first days of their mission or within months of their arrival in the country. This essay will endeavour: i) to explain why the ADF is years behind its coalition partners when it comes to the provision of timely, reliable, independent reporting from the front lines in Afghanistan, and; ii) to explore the purposes and effects of this media brownout?

As at April 2009, the ADF deployment to Afghanistan, mostly located in Uruzgan Province, totalled 1550 personnel principally divided between two forces, the Special Operations Task Group (SOTG) of around 350 men from the SAS and Commando regiments, and around 440 personnel in the Mentoring and Reconstruction Task Force (MRTF). While the SOTG provides security and force protection for Australian and other coalition forces operating in Uruzgan, the MRTF is mainly engaged in construction works, infrastructure development and the civilian training and capacity building that these make possible.² The MRTF also includes Operational and Mentoring Liaison Teams (OMLT) who embed with the Afghan National Army (ANA), plan and conduct joint operations and assist with training and capability development. Australian journalists have been visiting ADF troops at Camp Holland, their base outside Tarin Kowt, since their re-deployment to the country in March 2006. In the 12 months to April 2009, the Department of Defence's Media Operations Centre notes that, 28 different journalists from 17 different agencies – and 12 more accompanying visiting politicians and other VIPs – were hosted by the ADF in Afghanistan. While these numbers suggest a

relative openness to the media, a more detailed analysis of who these journalists are and what they were allowed to see when they got there demonstrates that the ADF is more interested in defending its version of the war than it is in discovering any new information that might challenge it. A disproportionate number of the media on these tours was drawn from ‘Lads’ Mags’, commercial radio, breakfast talk-show hosts, or reporters from news outlets linked to the soldiers’ home bases. Few of these reporters – when they were reporters – had any experience of defence or overseas postings, and as such they were the kind of journalists the ADF preferred. Less likely to ask curly questions, they could be relied on not only to provide an ostensibly objective channel for the ADF’s public affairs message but also to assist the military in communicating with and recruiting from its target demographic.

To ensure that the ADF’s preferred version of the war comes through loud and clear, it has brought in-house tasks that were once the sole province of the independent media. The nomination, gathering and editing of news from the front lines in Afghanistan are all now undertaken by Deployable Field Teams (DFTs), small teams of ADF personnel trained to operate cameras, take photographs, conduct interviews, and then edit the material for press or broadcast. The ADF evidently regards the media as a threat to the smooth running of its public affairs operation and as a consequence they are brought into the process only at the point of dissemination when newspapers and television networks transmit the material gathered for them by the military.

In its determination to close the promotional circle, bypass the media altogether and take its message directly to the public the ADF has its own dedicated You Tube channel.³ This provides the ADF with a platform for the broadcast of more overtly propagandist material. For example, the ‘story’, ‘Afghan and Australian forces offer no let-up against Taliban insurgents in Operation Zamara’i Lor’⁴ first broadcast on 14 June 2009, is notable for its contention that the ADF OMLTs are enjoying great success in Afghanistan and that ANA troops are taking on more active roles in operations against the Taliban: ‘The Australians say that the Afghans forces are showing real promise as a fighting force and have grown in confidence and capacity to plan and conduct operations’. This view contrasts with more critical assessments of the ANA’s performance and capacity from other sources within the ADF. The official inquiry into

the death of Corporal Matthew Hopkins, on March 16 2009, reveals that when Hopkins's joint patrol came under fire from the Taliban near the village of Kakarak the ANA troops failed to respond: 'Throughout the main part of the contact there appears to have been limited involvement by the ANA patrol personnel'⁵. In private, Tom Hyland notes, Australian soldiers 'were scathing, particularly towards the Afghan commander, who they complained was obstructive, lazy, reluctant to fight and unwilling to conduct the detailed planning that is normal for Australian troops'⁶. In its failure to concede the slightest ambivalence about the ANA's capacity and performance this You Tube broadcast says less about the troops' actual experience of the OMLT program than it does about their senior officers' determination to promote its successes.

Back in Australia the ADF's news management practices are of necessity a little more subtle, as the case of the repatriation and funeral of Australia's most recent fatality in Afghanistan, Private Benjamin Ranaudo, reveals⁷. In the last days of July 2009 when Private Ranaudo's body was returned to his family at Avalon Airport near Melbourne, a media release from the Department of Defence advised that 'At the request of the family the media will not be invited to attend this solemn event'. The next day, in a further media release describing the 'solemn repatriation ceremony', the family repeated its 'request that the media respects their privacy as they grieve their loss and lay Benjamin to rest'⁸. Yet if the Ranaudos were hoping that the ADF would help safeguard their privacy they were sadly disappointed. The Prime Minister, the Minister of Defence, the Minister of Defence Personnel, Materiel and Science, the Chief of Defence Forces, the Deputy Chief of the Army, their entourages and attendants were all at the funeral, and the ADF was instrumental in making sure that the whole country knew they were there. To ensure that the public were exposed to and appropriately affected by the 'solemnity' of the repatriation and the funeral, contrary to the express wishes of the family the military did not exclude the media from either ceremony, they simply invited their own. Both of the press releases I have alluded to above offer details about where and when the moving and still images of the ceremonies captured by the ADF's in-house or approved media would be made available to the media at large. Clearly, Defence and the military were not opposed to media coverage of the ceremonies *per se*, they simply wanted to ensure that they organised, directed and controlled it so that their version of what the ADF are doing

in Afghanistan, and how the men who serve and die there should be regarded, would remain unchallenged.

In Afghanistan, and later in the Second Gulf War, the US military embraced embedding not out of any inherent respect for First Amendment rights or a more generalised love of press freedom but because the public mistrusted their word and they needed the credibility the fourth estate brought to their accounts of events. By contrast, the ADF occupies a cherished place in Australian myths of national foundation and enjoys high levels of public confidence. It neither needs nor wants the media to tell its story or endorse its credibility. In Australia the media need the military far more than the military need them. As a consequence they have no leverage in their dealings with the military. Reduced to a state of virtual mendicancy they are grateful for whatever scraps of 'news' the ADF casts their way. In this context it is clear that much of what is presented to the Australian public as 'news' about its forces in Afghanistan is little more than ADF PR purposed not to tell us what is actually happening but to promote its version of what we are doing there and why.

Notes

1. The reporters were: Jonathan Pearlman of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Tom Hyland of the *Sunday Age*, Simon O'Dwyer, a Fairfax photographer, and David Speers of Sky News.
2. For a more detailed account of the ADF deployment in Afghanistan see Tanter (2009) <http://www.globalcollab.org/Nautilus/australia/afghanistan/australia-in-afghanistan>
3. The ADF You Tube channel can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/user/ADFMedia?gl=AU&hl=en-GB>
4. Afghan and Australian forces offer no let-up against Taliban insurgents in Operation Zamarai Lor, Youtube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wIG3OqWQVFQ&feature=channel>
5. Colonel W.R Hanlon, *Inquiry Officer's Report into the Death of Corporal M.R.A. Hopkins in Afghanistan on 16 March 2009* Canberra: Department of Defence, para. 30. A redacted version of the report can be accessed at <http://www.defence.gov.au/coi/reports/090624%20-%20IO%20Rpt%20into%20the%20death%20of%20CPL%20Hopkins%20-%20Redacted.pdf> The report observes that there are systemic problems with joint operations, that 'planning for operations in support of the ANA lacks certainty due to the disparate nature of the level of ANA BLANK and the BLANK supported commander' (para. 15). Though outranked and considerably outnumbered by their Afghan allies, it was the Australian soldiers who took charge of the situation, re-organised the ANA, mounted a fighting defence and called in a medevac chopper for their fatally wounded colleague.
6. Tom Hyland, 'Death inquiry reveals Afghan troop failings', the *Sunday Age*, 26 July, 2009, 4.
7. Though subtle they are still subject to foolish errors. The original Defence Media Release (MSPA 223/09) on 19 July 2009 announcing Private Ranaudo's death spelt his surname incorrectly ('Renaudo').
8. Department of Defence (Aus), 'Media Release MSPA 233/09 and MSPA 234/09', Canberra: Department of Defence.

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