Scribblings

Journal of the Pen & Sword Club

News, views, and analysis for defence communicators

October 2025 Editors: Mike Peters & Derek Plews

Caging and muzzling the media? What is going on in the Pentagon?

IT'S A MARK of the normally abnormal goings on in Trump's America that what would once have been controversial, headline events quickly disappear to be overtaken by the next jaw-dropper. One such event of particular interest to us in the Pen & Sword is the Pentagon's latest startling effort to turn the Pentagon Press Corp into glorified press officers. Because that is pretty much what they now want to do, writes Pen & Sword Executive Vice President Mark Laity.

This extraordinary measure is outlined in a 17-page memo released on September 19 by the so-called, Department of War (DoW), formerly and still legally known as the Department of Defence (DoD). In best bureaucratise it announces new measures on controlling media access and reporting in the Pentagon.

Anyone wanting to be in the Pentagon press corps has to sign up to its demands. The penalty for not signing is no Pentagon access, essential for any defence reporter in Washington to do their job. Seizure of the Pentagon Press Pass for any alleged breaches is essentially at the whim of Secretary of War Peter Hegseth.

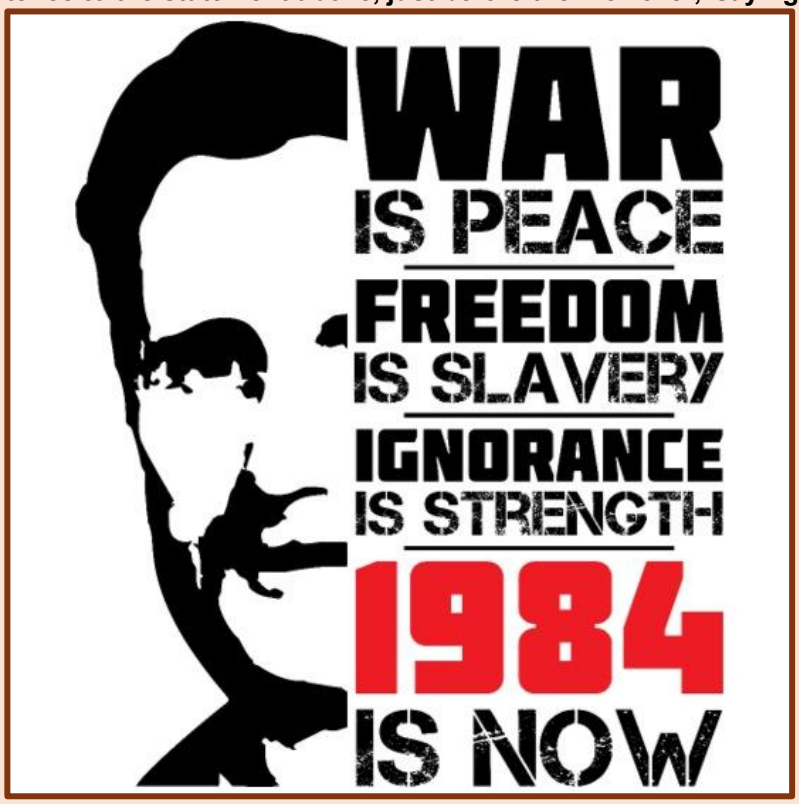
Much of it is fairly anodyne, but not all. Under the heading of 'Public Release of DoW Information and the Protection of Classified National Security Information (CNSI) and Controlled Unclassified Information (CUI)' comes the following little stinker:

"However, DoW information must be approved for public release by an appropriate authorizing official before it is released, even if it is unclassified."

In other words any journalist who has any DoW/D information of any kind, even unclassified, must get it approved for release by an 'authorizing official.' Who will that be I wonder? My guess is that will be a Press Officer.

And when will information be approved for release? The memo says, "DoW may only provide CUI to individuals when there is a lawful government purpose for doing so." I think we can safely assume that when it comes to journalists ONLY information provided by a press officer will be regarded as having a lawful purpose – noting it will be the DoW/D that's the sole determinator of lawful purpose.

But hey, there's a preamble sentence to the statement above, just before the 'however,' saying, "DoW remains committed to transparency to promote accountability and public trust." Yeah, right.



More like doublespeak. As with Orwell's 1984 doublethink where 'war is peace', then here 'secrecy is transparency'.

Let's be in no doubt here – if this is applied then basically the Pentagon press corps can only write stories approved by the DoW/D's public affairs office. Anyone within the DoW/D who gives a journalist information would know it would first of all be seen by a Press Officer and most likely be blocked, so what's the point in engaging in the first place.

So when I said US defence journalists would be little more than glorified press officers then it's hard to see how they could be anything else than mouthpieces for whatever Hegseth wants the world to know.

Let's also put some more context on this. In the rest of the 17 pages there are a whole series of restrictions on what was once a fairly widespread 'right to roam' by the Pentagon Press Corp. Even some of the more liberal PA officers thought this went a bit far – that's a matter for discussion – but add it altogether then the memo would both cage and muzzle the media.

Further, look at the other actions Hegseth and his cronies have already taken, virtually from day one. Starting in February several Pentagon news organizations were moved from their dedicated offices, including NBC News, Politico, the New York Times, and Washington Post, and largely replaced by slavish Trump-backing outlets, such as One America News, Newsmax and Breitbart.

DoW/D's engagement with the media, such as it is, reflects Hegseth's general hated of any but fawning coverage. Regular briefings have ended, while his so-called spokesman Sean Parnell, is more propagandist than spokesman. All they want is alt-right validation from their onside Trump-backing media friends.

DoW/D is going dark, trying to put up the shutters and control all information at a time when its role needs more attention and is more controversial than ever before in the modern era.

What's also worrying is the response – or rather limited and resigned nature of it. This is the land of the 1st Amendment on freedom of speech: 'Congress shall make no law…abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press…' The US has traditionally taken a massively expansive view of that freedom and attempts to limit it meet explosions of outrage and resistance. Not so much this time.

Disagreement certainly, including of course from the media itself, but even here it is curiously muted in tone to my eyes. Why? Personally, I think we are seeing the chilling effect of the wider impact of Trump's assault on opposition, maybe also a little stunned from the cumulative assault on what were once norms.

Mark Laity was the BBC's Defence Correspondent before becoming Press Secretary to Lord George Robertson, when he was NATO's Secretary General. Today Mark leads the international recognised StratCom Academy and is an acknowledged expert in strategic communications.

Also not much response – and this I guess is no surprise – from the Republicans. There was one notable and well-put blast from a Republican representative, Don Bacon, "This is so dumb that I have a hard time believing it is true. We don't want a bunch of Pravda newspapers only touting the Government's official position. A free press makes our country better. This sounds like more amateur hour."

***Good stuff I thought – but I also took a closer look. He's a former USAF Brigadier General, including once being a PA adviser to General David Petraeus, but more notably is seen as a moderate and maverick (bizarrely the two align in today's GOP) who is no longer seeking re-election. So, however praiseworthy, he can afford to step out of line. Others, not so much, having had their integrity by-pass operation*.**

The US Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press was also strong in its criticism and asked Pentagon spokesman, Sean Parnell, for some explanation as to the proposed muzzling. His reply was gobbledegook. As best as I could see he was claiming the rules were intended to restrict Pentagon staffers from giving unauthorized information to journalists. Nonsense – the original is plain enough, and any attempt to reinterpret it would only fool the hard of understanding or credulous.

It's worth laying out the personal context of my comments a little. My five decade career is split down the middle as first journalist, including 12 years as BBC Defence Correspondent, then NATO communicator. I've seen both sides, reported on and been a canary in the coalmine on defence establishment cock-ups, and also despaired at the excesses and sometimes bad behaviour of the media. When it comes to taking sides then I'm a definite hybrid but what I would say is that as NATO spokesman I regard it as an assault on my personal values and that of the alliance.

One of my heroes is Ed Murrow, pictured below, the legendary American wartime broadcaster, who, as a titan of US post-war broadcasting also brilliantly challenged the scourge of McCarthyism.

Later, he accepted JFK's offer to be head of the United States Information Agency, parent of the Voice of America. He was able to cross that divide between journalism and government communication without compromising his personal integrity.

As a journalist he would neither sign this memo, nor as a government communicator support its creation. We need Ed Murrow's not Trump-backing Steve Bannon's who (in his own words) want to 'flood the zone with shit.'

So, are we seeing yet another step on a fundamental shift in the US, and if so this should concern every defence communicator. Part of our role is to promote dialogue between the media and defence communications practitioners as well as build a network for the exchange of best practice. What the US does, as still NATO's dominant member, affects us all.

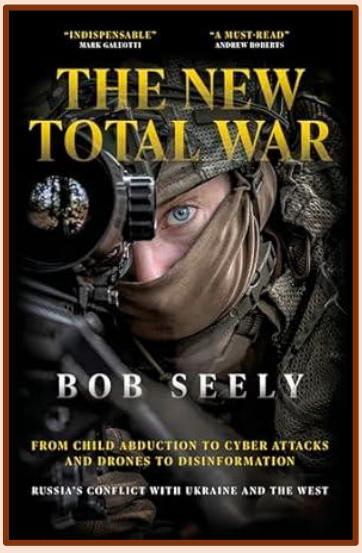
Even beyond that, as part of the Western Alliance which has freedom at its heart, then watching developments like this is a storm warning. We are watching a series of incremental changes that are adding up alarmingly.

Aside from anything else, I spent nearly a decade working directly for four-star US Generals. To see what's happening there is genuinely upsetting. Hegseth bangs on with simple-minded nonsense about 'lethality,' but his Department of War seems to be more at war with senior female military officers, anyone transgender, facial stubble, black history – and now the media, just at the point when it would be even more important to know what the hell is going on inside the Pentagon.

All this as Hegseth obediently, even enthusiastically follows Trump's orders for his Department of War to act within the US. For as I wrote this Trump announced, "…I am directing Secretary of War, Pete Hegseth, to provide all necessary Troops to protect War ravaged Portland, and any of our ICE Facilities under siege from attack by Antifa, and other domestic terrorists. I am also authorizing Full Force, if necessary…" War on Portland?

Never was a free media more important. As Ed Murrow said during the time of McCarthyism, "Nations have lost their freedom while preparing to defend it, and if we in this country confuse dissent with disloyalty, we deny the right to be wrong."

Bob Seely's Wake-Up Call on Russia's Information War – are we losing?



BRITAIN may be losing a war it has barely begun to fight. In *The New Total War: From Child Abduction to Cyber Attacks and Drones to Disinformation – Russia's Conflict with Ukraine and the West* (Biteback, 2025), Dr Bob Seely sets out a disturbing case: Russia has fused violence and manipulation into a single theatre of operations, while the United Kingdom and its allies remain unprepared.

The information war—once dismissed as background noise—is now a central front.

Seely's argument is stark. Modern conflict, he writes, has been transformed into a continuous, borderless struggle in which narratives, identities and morale are as much the targets as bridges or battalions. The publisher's introduction puts it clearly: *"Russia's new way of war is an updated form of total war. So, it's a conflict fought with cutting-edge drones, but it's also one where algorithms and bots peddle disinformation. It mixes assassinations, blackmail, and bribery with First World War-style trenches."*

In this conception, psy-ops, propaganda, and cyber sabotage are not support acts to conventional war, but decisive weapons in their own right. The danger for Britain, Seely insists, is that our institutions are still fighting yesterday's battles.

Edward Lucas, reviewing the book for the Center for European Policy Analysis, notes that *"NATO countries are lagging badly … struggling to match Russia's use of information, digital sabotage, and other disruptive measures."* The UK, he suggests, continues to regard narrative and information warfare as peripheral. Russia, by contrast, treats them as the opening salvos—attacks designed to divide, confuse, and demoralise long before the tanks move.

Seely's concern is not hypothetical. The Biteback summary makes the point: *"Russia considers itself at war with the West as well as Ukraine, directing some of the tactics used there against us."* In other words, the information war is already being waged on British soil—not with shells, but with stories. The question is whether Britain has the structures, doctrine, and resilience to resist. Seely fears it does not.

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Bob Seely, who once served in Media Operations Group (V) brings unusual authority to this subject. He was educated at Arnold House and Harrow before studying at King's College London. As a young man he worked as a foreign correspondent in Moscow and other post-Soviet capitals between 1990 and 1995, witnessing the collapse of the Soviet Union at first hand. In 2008 he joined the British Army Reserve, serving with the Intelligence Corps.

He deployed on operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and against ISIS, earning a Joint Commanders Commendation in 2009 and the Military MBE in 2016. Rising to the rank of Captain, he remains a reservist.

Alongside his military service he pursued academic study, completing a PhD in International Security Studies at King's College London with a thesis on contemporary Russian warfare.

He became a Research Associate with Oxford's Changing Character of War Programme and, from 2017 to 2024, served as Conservative MP for the Isle of Wight, where he was one of the most persistent parliamentary voices on Russia and hybrid threats. His career weaves together journalism, soldiering, scholarship, and politics—an unusual vantage point from which to diagnose the new era of conflict.

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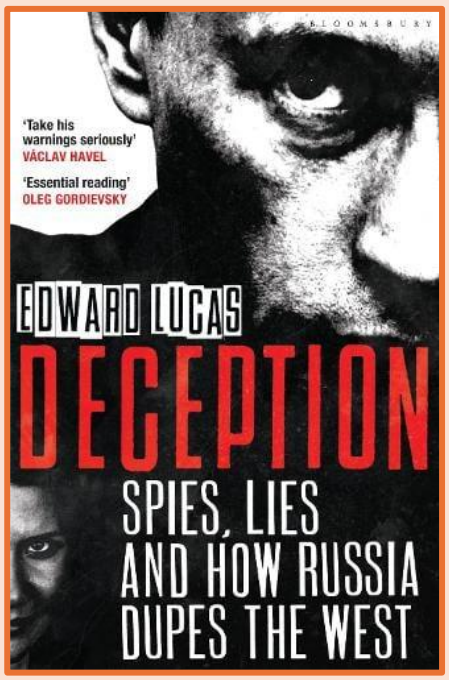
Although published in mid-2025, *The New Total War* is only now being taken seriously in defence communications circles. The reasons are instructive. The ongoing war in Ukraine has made clear that disinformation, energy coercion, and cyber-attacks are not peripheral but central. Institutional inertia in London and other capitals has delayed recognition of this reality. And as public awareness of disinformation grows, policymakers are finally more receptive to arguments that once seemed abstract.

Seely's status as a serving reservist officer, a seasoned journalist and a trained scholar lends the book credibility at precisely the moment when defence communicators are searching for new frameworks. The recognition may be late, but it is timely: the UK's vulnerability in narrative warfare is increasingly obvious, and Seely's analysis offers both diagnosis and prescription.

Bob Seely's warning is not simply that Britain is behind. It is that the very terms of conflict have shifted. Wars in the twenty-first century are not only about armies and arsenals but about belief, cohesion, and truth. *"This is not war as we once knew it, but a new total war in which information and identity are as much the target as soldiers and cities."* Unless the UK treats the information front with the same seriousness as the physical battlefield, it risks losing wars without fighting them—and discovering too late that the defeat has come not on foreign fields, but in the corrosion of its own democracy.



Russia modernising its dirty tricks brigade

Edward Lucas, writing in the Times in July commented:

…..Seely's book hits home. A soldier and journalist before his seven years in parliament, with a PhD in Russian war studies, he argues that Ukraine is the military centre of a wider conflict. The Kremlin also wants to divide, demoralise and ultimately defeat Nato. Inside Russia, militaristic propaganda entrenches the regime's political and economic power. "Russia is a country of warriors; it has never known how to live outside a state of war.

…..Seely is not the first to highlight the danger (the British former defence official Keir Giles has written on similar lines). But he adds impact to his argument with vivid reportage from the Ukrainian front line, where he highlights the military revolution since the full-scale invasion of 2022. The tanks and warships that feature so heavily in the West's military imagination and budgets look like dinosaurs in an era of cheap swarms of drones that increasingly (and soon wholly) run on automated systems for navigation and targeting.

…..Both at home and abroad, Russia has revived and modernised Soviet-era dirty tricks. It combines real-life assassinations with character assassinations using deep-fakes and stolen data. It integrates every element of state power behind its goals, using cocktails of money, propaganda, lawsuits, and thuggery that leave most western countries bemused and hamstrung.

These threats are murky and mounting. Nato's cohesion depends on shaky politics in Europe and on the mercurial man in the White House. Our defences (military and non-military) are a shambles. And we have no stomach for deterrence.

Conducting media operations at the tactical level can be a tough gig.

COMMANDERS sometimes struggle to see value in the function. Some do not really understand how it supports the mission at the sharp end, says Scribblings Editor Derek Plews.

Others may even perceive it as an unnecessary, centre-driven evil that is more focused on PR for the MOD and its ministers, and keeping the home audience happy, rather than contributing enemy-focused effect in the theatre of operations.

They can see the impact of dropping a 500lb bomb or conducting a drone swarm strike on an enemy position. They understand how to assess the effectiveness of key leader engagement. But they find it more difficult to see the worth of media operations efforts in terms of their impact on the behaviours and attitudes of the adversary.

As a result, if faced with a choice between additional electronic warfare specialists or a combat camera team, many tactical commanders are likely to choose the former This attitude is purblind.'

Firstly, it does not give sufficient weight to the importance of building and maintaining UK public support for - and confidence in - the mission. Low public approval at home can quickly drive down force morale while providing a boost for the enemy. At the same time, any failure to manage media messaging at the sharp end risks a rapid reduction in manoeuvre room for commanders on the ground as the public begin to question the conduct of operations and politicians put pressure on the military to alter their approach in a bid to improve popular approval.

The so-called "Wootton Bassett Effect" is an example of this. The small Wiltshire town, then home to RAF Lyneham, the UK's repatriation airfield, became the focus for collective mourning over British losses in Iraq and Afghanistan, calling into question the conduct of these conflicts.

Secondly, it also fails to recognise the role that media ops can play, as part of a co-ordinated Information Activities function, properly integrated with more kinetic means, to help to influence the adversary's behaviours, attitudes, or intentions. Even when direct access to the enemy's media environment is difficult, information can still find its way there through third-party channels and voices.

Thirdly, it potentially makes the job of the media operations cell much more difficult. In a command-driven headquarters, the staff quickly identify the commander's focus and if media ops is not high on his or her priorities, the same will be true of the wider team. This increases friction. Media staff officers find it harder to have a meaningful input into the planning process, or to convince a battlegroup CO to find space for a combat camera team on a patrol, or to embed a journalist for an operation.

Some of the blame for this is undoubtedly down to a failure of military education. Not enough is being done to convince the commanders of tomorrow of the importance of media operations. Insufficient time is allocated to the information domain at Staff College. There is little space in the syllabus of the 46-week Advanced Command and Staff Course nor the Higher Command and Staff Course, which lasts for 17 weeks, for anything more than a cursory look at information warfare as a whole.

But another significant reason for this negative attitude may be down to weaknesses in the current media evaluation models, which provide tactical media operators with little help when it comes to demonstrating their worth to commanders.

The Government Communications Service (GCS) has developed a reasonably robust evaluation framework, which leans heavily on academic work carried out by Prof Kevin Money,

pictured left, and others at the University of Reading's prestigious Henley Business School. This incorporates the psychology of behaviour-change and is integrated with the current communications planning process, OASIS – Objectives, Audience, Strategy, Implementation and Scoring/Evaluation – to provide an end-to-end planning and measurement tool. Evaluation is conducted under the following headings:

Inputs. The planning and research that informs the campaign, providing a baseline measure against which future effort can be assessed, points to achievable targets and sets out how the communications activities will deliver or support the desired objectives. This is linked to the O in OASIS.

Outputs. An assessment of what has been delivered and how the audience has interact with the communication. It provides an indication of how successfully the comms activities have reached the audience and includes press coverage, social media impressions etc. Outputs are also linked to the behaviour-change model, COM-B (Capability, Opportunity, Motivation and Behaviour).

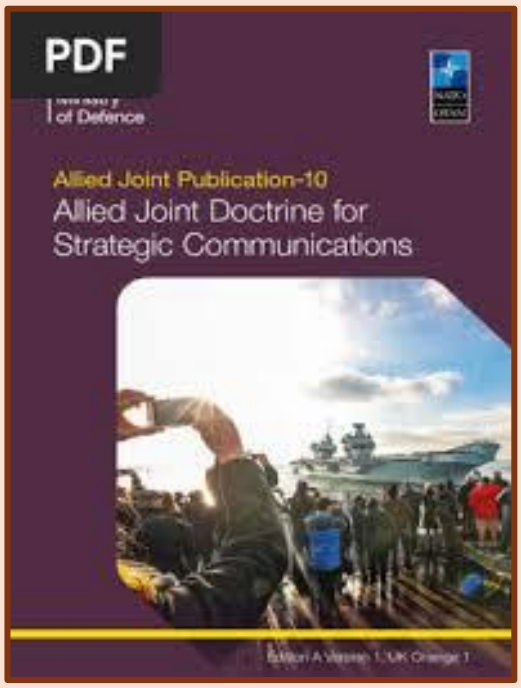
Out-takes. A measure of how the comms activities impacted on the Target Audience's awareness, understanding, attitudes, emotions, and intentions. What did the audience think, feel, or intend to do as a result of the messaging?

Outcomes. Identifying and quantifying actual behavioural changes.

Impact. Drawing a link between all of the above to determine how the comms activity has contributed to or impacted on the objectives – a comparison of actual outcomes data with the original KPIs or objectives to measure whether these were met.

Used properly, this framework can work well for national behaviour-change drives like the "Stoptober" anti-smoking campaign. At this level, departments are advised to allocate up to 10 percent of the budget for evaluation. This allows them to generate data - beyond basic social media metrics such as impressions, re-posts, dwell-times etc - by conducting robust but expensive qualitative and quantitative tracking research.

In the military context, while this approach might be of utility at the strategic and operational levels, it is of no practical use to the hard-pressed media operations staff officer, operating down in the tactical weeds and struggling to demonstrate the effects and value of his or her labours.



Current doctrine is of little assistance. Allied Joint Publication (AJP) 10 - Strategic Communications acknowledges the importance of evaluation and analysis. Under its IDEA framework (insights, data, evaluation, and analysis), this is focused, correctly, on high-level metrics and Measures of Effectiveness (MOE) based on what the target audiences are saying and doing - at campaign level - as a means of reporting upwards to political and military masters.

AJP 10.3 – Military Public Affairs, points heavily towards media monitoring as a way of alerting commanders to what the media is saying and what that means for the force. The key role of Media Analysis is to assess the media environment and to support communications plans, providing post-engagement feed-back.

There is nothing that mandates measuring and linking what the media operations team is doing with what this is actually delivering in terms of influencing the adversary.

AJP10.1 – Information Operations notes that assessment is important to report back on the performance and effectiveness of Information Activities (Media Ops and PSYOPS) to support decision-making and campaign development. Assessment, it notes, quoting from the Association for the Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC)'s Barcelona Principles, is best derived from a combination of criteria involving qualitative and quantitative measures of observable behaviour. But it accepts that this is easier said than done when access to audiences is not always possible.

To be fair, the same is true for a large proportion of day-to-day government communications grind that is not connected with large-scale campaigns – effort that the GCS describes as "low or no-cost," for which no evaluation budget is available.

Recognising this, the GCS offers a separate, simpler, three-tier evaluation framework. However, even at its most comprehensive, this does little more than provide an analysis of social media sentiment and tone of media coverage to produce a finger-in-the-air assessment of the likely impact, with little in the way of hard data to back it up.

Lt Colonel Derek Plews was a Northern Ireland journalist before joining the Civil Service in 1985. He has worked for several Government departments and was Press Secretary to Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott and Defence Secretary, Geoff Hoon.

An army reservist, he left the civil service in 2006 to deploy to Afghanistan in a military role. He subsequently completed tours of duty in Iraq before taking up various appointments in the Ministry of Defence.

Retiring in 2020 he now divides his time between conducting historical research, visiting First World War battlefields, and volunteering as a trustee of the Bucks Military Museum Trust.

This method can tell us how hard we worked to get the messages out there; some idea of reach achieved; whether the audience has engaged with the messaging; and, over time, if there is an observable shift in sentiment. But without qualitative and quantitative research data, it cannot provide a reliable assessment that directly links media operations effort with behaviours, attitudes, or intent among the target audience.

The Joint Information Activities Group, providing specialist training for defence and other government departments, wrestles with the same problem. Its two-week Joint Media Practitioners' Course covers planning, creation, and assessment of communications activities, and is heavily focused on social media.

As well as requiring students to identify overall communications goals, it mandates the establishment of KPIs based on metrics such as conversion rates (the percentage of users who complete a specific desired action), click-throughs (user clicks a link to access further information), engagement, audience share and followers.

"Vanity metrics" such as page views, impressions and like should be avoided. Reporting, which is conducted down to Brigade level, should identify trends directly relevant to the mission, utilising social media tools such as Hootsuite and Brandwatch.

But none of this can provide a sceptical commander with convincing evidence of cognitive effects linked to a specific set of media activities, or a measure of value from the media operations effort.

Within this approach, such an assessment can only be subjective – i.e. "we can see that x% of the target audience engaged with the communication, therefore, we conclude that the message is likely to have been communicated to that cohort."

But that is not the same as being able to establish if the communication has resulted in a shift in attitudes, behaviours, or intent. It might be possible to observe such changes over time, and to conclude that these have been brought about by the successful integration of information and kinetic effects. It would be much more difficult to establish a direct link to media ops activities on their own.

Sadly, this conundrum may never be solved. The effort required to deliver the robust, meaningful data that can stretch a golden thread from a set of media activities to a specific behavioural or attitudinal effect, may remain beyond the ability of sub-campaign level practitioners to deliver.

If that is so, there is a danger that tactical media operations will continue to be seen by some as a "Cinderella" function, rather than a critical element of their information warfare armoury.

One Hundred Brits, a Peace Mission, and the Politics of Publicity – a what if problem for the UK.

By Colonel Mike Peters, TD – former Commanding Officer The British Army's Media Operations Group, a Principal Information Officer in the Government Communications Service. And an evening newspaper journalist: he sets a scene if Britain changed its mind and contributed to a Gaza peace keeping and stabilising force.

THE PHONE RINGS! Not a routine briefing, not even a polite request — a direction. "We're offering to join the international Gaza monitoring mission. About a hundred, all told. You'll lead the British contingent. Orders in 48 hours."

The Brigadier, awake now, knows what that means. The Americans are sending 200, the Europeans some more, and the United Nations will wrap it all in blue helmets and procedural good intentions. It will be a small, complicated peace — if it comes at all.

He hangs up, finds the map, and runs a thumb down the Mediterranean coast. It's not the first time Britain has answered a call like this. But this time the battlefield is global perception — the intersection of politics, social media, and the need to keep people alive while being seen to be doing something.

He has his orders. And a headache!

Déjà vu with better Wi-Fi

Forty-two years ago, in the winter of 1983, a similar call sent me to Beirut. A hundred soldiers, a few armoured cars, and a sentence that still makes me wince: "Go out there and help the Commanding Officer." That was Operation Hyperion.

I had a sergeant photographer but not even a typewriter, just a spare office in the British embassy. What brief I had was elastic, the dangers solid. We worked with what we had, and sometimes that was just nerve.

Today, the equipment is digital, and the deadlines measured in seconds, but the feeling is the same — a sinking certainty that the politicians will want images before you have security, and headlines before you have context. A mission too small and too visible

The Gaza deployment, as sketched in London, is to be a peace-monitoring force: impartial, lightly armed, and coordinated with the UN and regional authorities. On paper, straightforward. In practice, it's a communications minefield.

A hundred British troops under a multinational flag will attract more attention than a 1,000 under NATO. The first aircraft landing will trend online before the dust settles. Every picture will be dissected for bias; every silence will be filled by someone else's narrative.

Back home, ministers will want visibility — the moral symbolism of British uniforms standing for stability. But on the ground, the commander will want invisibility — a quiet profile to avoid becoming a target. Between those two desires sits an Information Operations officer clutching a laptop and a set of impossible rules.

The Brigadier and the Lieutenant Colonel

How might it go? At 08:00 the Brigadier calls in a battalion commander, a Lieutenant Colonel who has that familiar expression: alert, courteous, and already calculating the odds.

"Right," the Brigadier begins, "the politics are bigger than the footprint. We'll be under a UN umbrella, side by side with the Americans. Expect microphones before mission orders."

He pauses. "Our job is to protect, inform, and reassure. That means disciplined communication, not noise. You'll also form a small information operations and a media team — maybe a dozen all told. They'll be our eyes, our voice, and our firewall. They must get it right first time."

The Lieutenant Colonel nods, scribbles, asks the only sensible question: "Who's actually on the ground?"

"Everyone and no one," the Brigadier says. "The US will have a media cell. The UN will have an office. The rest will have opinions."

Inside the modern information front line

By lunchtime, the Lieutenant Colonel's orders group is working through the list.

One Info Ops officer — a captain with a calm manner and a talent for understatement. One Public Affairs Officer — experienced, articulate, and allergic to spin. Photographer, videographer, social-media producer, two monitoring analysts, a UN liaison, a link for casualty coordination, a comms technician to keep the bandwidth alive. If he's lucky!

That's it. Perhaps a dozen people to manage a six-month narrative under global scrutiny.

Their task: verify facts, clear releases, post content, monitor sentiment, counter misinformation, and do it all without compromising the mission or the people they serve.

They will share a shipping container behind the HQ — laptops on folding tables, a satellite link, a kettle that never boils fast enough. From there, they will feed imagery to London, coordinate statements with Washington, and negotiate tone with a UN press officer who insists on triple translation.

And, again, this is if they are lucky. Is there currently a trained and ready a British deployable info ops group? Yes, that is the big question!

The politics of imagery

The optics will be fraught. London will want to show professionalism and resolve; the local audience will want reassurance and restraint. The Americans will bring cinematic production values. The UN will want consensus.

The British solution, if it's to work, must be understated credibility: crisp stills, short, verified clips, human-interest features about medical support and engineering help — the kind of content that shows discipline without chest-beating.

No drone footage, no glamour shots of kit, no adrenaline montages. Every image checked for what it reveals, every caption checked for what it implies.

The PAO's mantra is simple: *truth, context, compassion*. It's not catchy, but it keeps people alive.

The wider coalition

Around them, the multinational machine creaks into motion. The Americans supply the bandwidth and the press facilities. The Europeans offer translators and digital design. The UN provides the badge of legitimacy and a labyrinth of approval chains.

Some contingents arrive with polished media officers; others with soldiers who have never spoken to a journalist. A British sergeant spends his first afternoon running an impromptu seminar titled "Why You Don't Post That on Facebook."

Everyone nods. A few hours later, someone does exactly that. The first correction goes out before breakfast.

Owning the narrative

The Media Coordination Cell becomes the mission's nerve centre. Every morning at 07:00 they compile a Joint Information Bulletin: who moved where, what was delivered, what needs correcting. At 08:00 they brief the commander. By 09:00, if all goes well, a short statement is released to the UN feed and mirrored on national channels.

It's not glamorous. It's disciplined repetition. The public see a steady, factual stream: monitoring patrols, aid convoys, community meetings. What they don't see is the choreography behind each sentence — the legal review, the public-affairs check, the commander's final signature.

And when the inevitable happens — a clash at a checkpoint, an explosion too close for comfort — the same cell produces the holding statement within an hour, dignified and precise: *"We can confirm there has been an incident involving UK personnel. Our priority is the safety of our people and the protection of civilians. Further information will be released when verified."*

No speculation, no bravado, no leaks. Just measured words buying time. But, on the ground, the media is on the hunt. The news is already flashing around the world. When, asks, the press, do we get the facts?

Families and home-front pressure

Back in Britain, the families watch and wait. The Joint Casualty Clearing Centre stands ready, as it always does, to handle the calls no one wants to make. The PAO in theatre knows that every misstep in wording could land on a doorstep in Swindon or Inverness.

When repatriation flights eventually come — because in operations like this they can — the process will be as it has been since Afghanistan: solemn, televised, unavoidable. The Info Ops team will ensure the dignity of those moments is preserved, not exploited.

Training the message

Each soldier receives a short, sharp media brief before deployment. Rule one: don't post location or movement.. Rule two: never speak for the mission. Rule three: if in doubt, say nothing and call the Public Affairs Officer.

Most follow it. A few need reminders. In an age when a private with a smartphone can reach more people than a newspaper, discipline is as important online as it is on patrol.

The commander's burden

For the Lieutenant Colonel, the daily routine becomes a tightrope walk between visibility and safety. He must reassure his political masters that Britain is active and effective, while ensuring that no one under his command becomes a prop for anyone's narrative.

Every decision has a headline attached. Deploy more troops to a hotspot — "Britain takes charge. "Hold back — "Britain hesitates. "Say nothing — "Britain silent." The only defence is professionalism and truth delivered quickly.

The lesson of small forces

A hundred British soldiers in a volatile peace can achieve remarkable effects — but only if their story is told honestly and coherently. That requires an information system as disciplined as the men and women it represents.

NATO rightly call it "strategic communications." The UN calls it "public information." The British, characteristically, call it "getting the word out without making it worse."

That humility may be our best export.

What it feels like

Late one night the Brigadier walks through the small media hut. Screens glow in the half-light: one showing BBC World, another an Arabic feed, a third the endless scroll of social media. The PAO is drafting tomorrow's lines. The photographer is editing an image of soldiers unloading medical supplies — nothing dramatic, just human hands passing boxes in the dark.

The Brigadier watches for a moment, then says quietly, "That's the picture we need. Ordinary people doing something right." He knows it won't make the front page. But it might, in some small way, help the mission survive.

The old and the new

I watch these scenarios now from the distance of years and wonder what has really changed since that day in Beirut where Sgt Monty Montgomery shot that picture, above, of reality Crisis Communications. The tools are sharper, the scrutiny merciless, but the fundamentals are the same: people, responsibility, and the fragile bridge between truth and perception.

If a British contingent goes to Gaza next month — and it might — their hardest battles will be fought in the space between camera lens and conscience. They'll need kit, yes, and training. But more than that, they'll need discipline, humility, and the courage to say only what they know.

Because in the end, the modern soldier's weapon in a peace mission isn't the rifle slung across the chest — it's credibility, competence and, above all, compassion. And British public support. Lose that, and you lose the mission.

A sharp and timely lesson for military media operations

IT IS a quietly tragic irony: in a world where journalists must now be formally assigned a police officer in every force to advise them on personal protection, the very act of telling truth has become a hazard to be defended against rather than a service to be respected. That such measures are now deemed necessary reveals how far we have slipped — from a time when correspondents carried little more than a notebook and a flak jacket to a present where their work demands security detail and diplomatic caution.

For all who value free societies, it marks a sombre turning point, writes Scribblings Editor Mike Peters as the UK Government announces that every police force in the country now has an officer dedicated to the protection of journalists,

Mike is the Senior Executive Vice President of The Pen and a founding member when the club emerged nearly 50 years ago.

His service includes BAOR roles with the Royal Military Police and as a Company Commander with 5th Light Infantry. As a government press officer he ran the Army Press Desk during the Falklands War and deployed to Northern Ireland and to Sinai and Beirut with Multi National Forces.

The statistics speak for themselves. In 2024, at least 124 journalists and media workers were killed worldwide — the deadliest year on record. Around two-thirds of those deaths were Palestinians covering the Israel–Gaza conflict, which alone claimed over 230 lives, making it the most lethal war for journalists in modern history. Across the world, a journalist or media worker now dies, on average, every three days. Many of these deaths occur not through mischance but through deliberate targeting — a stark erosion of the protections once afforded to those bearing witness to war.

For the British Armed Forces, this grim trend carries a sharp and timely lesson. The protection of journalists in conflict zones was once regarded as part of the duty of escorting officers, often drawn from the ranks of trained public information or media operations specialists.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the now-defunct Media Operations Group (Volunteers) played a leading role in developing those skills — ensuring that embedded journalists could operate safely alongside British troops while maintaining their independence and freedom to report. Long before "hostile environment" training became fashionable, MOG(V) officers were teaching soldiers and reporters how to work together under fire, managing both risk and reputation.

The disbandment of that unit — and the removal of its function from the Army's order of battle — left a vacuum that has yet to be filled.

In an era when the line between information and disinformation is itself a battlefield, this gap is more dangerous than ever. Modern operations demand not just protection for journalists, but an understanding that their safety and credibility are integral to operational legitimacy.

As the statistics of journalist deaths continue to climb, it is time to remember that responsibility for the truth does not end at the perimeter wire — and that those who once made it their duty to safeguard the storytellers of war were serving the cause of both freedom and the armed forces' own honour.

Getty Images

Journalist safety officers established in every police force in UK

By Emily Atkinson, BBC News, 5 October 2025

EVERY UK police force now has a dedicated officer for journalists facing threats of abuse and violence, the UK government has said. Journalist safety liaison officers (JSLOs) form part of a "strengthened partnership" between police, government, and media professionals, who have increasingly become targets both online and on the ground, it said.

"Too often, journalists are put in harm's way while fulfilling their vital role of delivering accurate news to the public," said Media Minister Ian Murray. "It is only right that they feel supported and protected."

The Society of Editors and the News Media Association welcomed the move, while the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) called it a "crucial milestone."

All 43 forces in England and Wales, the British Transport Police and Counter Terror Policing now have a JSLO, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) said. This is in addition to pre-existing JSLOs in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The DCMS said the officers can provide safety guidance ahead of high-risk reporting, such as protests, and ensure crimes against journalists are consistently recorded and addressed. The officers were appointed as part of the government's national action plan for the safety of journalists, external, launched by the previous Conservative administration in October 2023.

In recent years, there have been rising fears that press freedom is coming increasingly under attack. Among the most high profile cases was the murder of Lyra McKee, who was shot while observing a rioting in the Creggan estate in Derry in April 2019.

In June, a report by Amnesty International - dedicated in part to Ms McKee - found that there had been 71 attacks or threats on journalists in Northern Ireland since 2019.

Dozens of journalists reported receiving death and bomb threats, while some said they had installed bullet-proof windows, reinforced doors, panic buttons, and CCTV cameras to protect them in their homes. The report also found that many journalists no longer reported threats due to "time consuming processes and lack of action or positive outcome".

Murray said he hoped by appointing a JSLO in every police force that reporters would "feel reassured knowing they have a direct point of contact if issues arise". A spokesperson for the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) said it was "proud" to have worked alongside the government on the establishment of JSLOs.

NUJ Secretary-General Laura Davision said the move would be welcomed by reporters. “No journalist should ever face threats or abuse as part of their role, and ensuring designated contacts to approach serves as a crucial milestone in providing practical, vital support to journalists when needed most," she said.

Dawn Alford, chief executive of the Society of Editors, said it was "a vital step in ending impunity for crimes against journalists", while News Media Association chief executive Owen Meredith called it a "very welcome initiative. A spokesperson for the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) said it was "proud" to have worked alongside the government on the establishment of JSLOs.

"We will continue to play our part in ensuring that journalists are protected and empowered to do their jobs without fear or intimidation," Deputy Chief Constable Sam de Reya added.

Concerns over journalists' safety extend beyond the According to the latest data from the US-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CJP), 104 journalists and media workers were killed worldwide in 2024. It said a further 375 had been imprisoned, while 70 others were missing.

Simon Enright is an Honorary Vice President

SIMON Enright, the Director of Communications at the UK Ministry of Defence, has joined the Pen & Sword as one of the growing band of leading defence communicators who support the Club as Vice Presidents.

Appointed to his Ministry role in 2024 after a period in senior consultancy at Freuds Advisory, he leads the department-wide communications team in strategy, media relations, and reputation management. Before joining the MoD, Simon was Director of Communications at NHS England and NHS Improvement where he oversaw national health messaging, including through the early COVID-19 response and the vaccination campaign.

Earlier in his career he was a BBC journalist and editor, working across flagship programmes and units including running the BBC World Affairs Unit, serving as Deputy Editor of *Newsnight* and of General Election coverage He also served as Assistant Editor at *BBC Breakfast*.

Following NHS England, Simon undertook senior advisory work in the private sector and served in Royal Household communications. He is a regular contributor to professional forums on public-sector communications and defence industry engagement and appears publicly in his official capacity as MoD communications lead. He is based in London and is an alumnus of the University of Oxford.

Members in the News

New Trustee to RAF Benevolent Fund

JOHN Neilson, FCIPR, Director of International Communications at Lockheed Martin and a Club Vice President has been appointed a Trustee of the UK's Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund.

"My love of aviation started as a boy, looking up at the skies and dreaming of flight. That dream became reality when I joined the RAF Air Cadets, who provided exciting opportunities for personal development, taught me to fly and built my first real connection to the RAF. The experiences and values I picked up there have shaped so much of who I am today.

"With more than 30 years of experience working in aerospace and deterrence, aviation has been more than just a profession, it's a lifelong passion that's rooted in my early experience with the RAF family. The RAF Benevolent Fund embodies the very culture and values that inspired me at the start of my journey: care, compassion, and steadfast support for those who serve, have served, and their families. "To now have the chance to give something back to this community, through such a respected and meaningful organisation, feels incredibly special. I'm excited, proud, and grateful for the opportunity to serve." John was a journalist in the UK's North East and moved into public relations with Nissan. He held senior appointments in BAE Systems including responsibility for the Gripen programme with Saab of Sweden.

Silver Accolade for Jane and Shephard PR

JANE Shepherd MBE Director of Shepherd PR is also a UK Export Champion and an RAF Reserve Media Ops Specialist. She told Scribblings: "It was a proud moment for Shepherd PR as myself and Kim Peatfield headed to the National Arboretum to receive the silver accolade at the Armed Forces Covenant Employer Recognition Awards.

"The award recognises the work we have been doing to build links and opportunities between the Armed Forces and our clients and other associate partners, particularly the trade associations we work with.

This includes highlighting the opportunities available to Service Leavers in the building materials sector, through the Ltd.'s Building Materials Careers programme.

Moscow Hoped the Dark Arts of Cyber Warfare would Prevail….

WRITING in The Critic, Club member Peter Caddick Adams expounded on the reasons why Russia is hurting badly. He said…. it is enlightening to realise that more of Russia's armed service personnel are engaged in monitoring and policing internal dissent than are supporting the war against Ukraine. It has just been revealed that Russian cyber officials are now systematically restricting access of their citizens to the world wide web, social media abroad and international phone calls. Even though he has no plans to scale back military spending, budgeted at 40 percent of all federal expenses for 2025, this is obviously a war Mr Putin cannot continue to fight forever.

Moscow hoped the dark arts of unrestricted cyber warfare would prevail, but the keyboard warriors of Kyiv's Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT) pursued a winning digital offensive that has never gained the same attention as their armed forces.

Ukraine's cyber soldiers have been battling online since before 2014, when Mr Putin's troops first illegally occupied the Crimea and Donbass provinces of Donetsk and Lugansk. The skills Kyiv's men acquired in eight years of electronic warfare prior to the 2022 invasion explain why Mr Zelensky's computer whizzkids still prevent Moscow from gaining the upper hand in the ether.

Elsewhere, in the manner of Britain's wartime SOE, numerous behind-the-lines sabotage teams directed by Kyiv's SBU security service have been assassinating Russian commanders, damaging roads, bridges, and rail infrastructure, hitting power plants, disrupting a wide range of war-related manufacturing plants, destroying 13.5 percent of oil refining capability, with the result that ordinary auto fuel is now rationed.

The SBU's 30,000 personnel are six times larger than the British domestic MI5 and external MI6 services combined. More recently they have been directing drones and laser-marking targets throughout the Russian Federation. Meanwhile on 18 August, Mr Zelensky unveiled his FP-5 "Flamingo" missile, already in production. Fitted with a 1,150 kg (2,540 lb) warhead and possessing a range of 3,000 km (1,900 miles), flocks of Flamingos are reportedly already in production and ready to hit Russia as effectively as Putin's drones and rockets are nightly targeting Ukraine.

NATO Deterrence: Time to Think Like Russia, Act Like NATO!

SO said Peter Clark, a Director of the StratCom Academy, formerly a member of the NATO communications team in Brussels and one time commanding officer of 7644 Squadron RAuxAF. He added: Russian military posturing in North West Europe is not just steel on water, jets in the air, or boots on the ground - it is an attack in the cognitive domain.

As its fight to recolonise Ukraine flounders and its military reputation lies in tatters, it is an attempt to present military capability where there is none, to delay decisions, to influence decision making, to reassure its allies.

Russian strategic culture is rooted in three things: Insecurity - a worldview of permanent encirclement. Respect for strength - words mean little without visible readiness and action.

Ambiguity as a weapon - grey zones, unsafe intercepts, and hybrid sabotage are all deliberate and acceptable tools of statecraft.

Whether you agree doesn't matter, it's what Russian leaders think. So, if deterrence is about shaping the adversary's calculus, NATO must tailor its posture to how Russia thinks, not just Allied intent. NATO's deterrence posture must be designed for Russian psychology. You don't win at chess by knowing how the pieces move, you win by understanding how your opponent uses them.

Three imperatives stand out. NATO must show: Unity: deny Moscow its favourite narrative of division. Readiness: demonstrated daily, not declared annually. Resilience: from undersea cables to cyber nodes to media literacy.

The challenge? Despite doctrinal recognition, NATO's StratCom structure remains dispersed, under-resourced, and reactive. To compete, to win, the cognitive war, StratCom must be command-led.

Sometimes you just have to laugh, really!

Practice makes…holes

DURING live-fire training at Castlemartin, a British Army Warrior managed to hose down a Challenger 2 tank with six 30 mm inert rounds. No injuries, no damage — just a new line for the safety brief.

The MoD called it "an isolated incident." Quite. Nothing like a burst of friendly fire practice before heading off to reassure NATO allies in Estonia.
Source: BBC News, 23 Sept 2025

Death by Teams

Sir Tony Radakin, lately Chief of the Defence Staff, has diagnosed the MoD's greatest modern enemy: Microsoft Teams.

Endless calls with 20 or 30 faces staring into webcams are, he says, paralysing reform. Entire operations have been planned in less time than some of these meetings.

One imagines Monty, pipe in hand, asking if the Germans would kindly wait until we've found the "share screen" button.
Source: The Guardian, 15 Sept 2025

First! (ish)

The MoD proudly announced that RAF Typhoons had flown their first NATO "Eastern Sentry" sortie over Poland. A milestone! Though some wags muttered we've been doing air policing in Europe for years already. In the world of alliance PR, everything is the "first" of something — first operational sortie, first enhanced sortie, first sortie after the last first sortie.

At this rate, the only true first will be the first time nobody notices.
Source: UK Government press release, 20 Sept 2025

Send your comms bloopers to michaelpcoms@btinternet.com

Editors' Notes:

All comment in Scribblings is the opinion of the authors.