

False Memories and Professional Culture: The Australian Defence Force, the Government and the Media at War in Afghanistan

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One of the more remarkable effects of the September 11 attacks on the United States mainland was their apparently revolutionary impact on military-media relations in the US and how this supposedly catalysed a liberalisation of information management policies among militaries across the globe. This chapter will explain why the radical changes that eventuated in the US and far beyond were implemented much later and in a much-diluted form in Australia and how they can only be understood in the context of the history of military-media engagement through the 1980s and 1990s. It will then consider how the Australian Defence Force's continued commitment to restrictive and tightly managed relations between the military and the media rested on a stubborn fidelity to false memories of the Vietnam experience and how these shaped Australian coverage of the war in Afghanistan.

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In the years after its retreat from Vietnam in 1975, the US military and its supporters insisted that the media had lost a war that ‘South Vietnamese and American forces actually won’, that though they had ‘crushed the Viet Cong in the South’ and ‘threw back the invasion by regular North Vietnamese divisions...the War was finally lost to the invaders *after* the US disengagement because the political pressures built up by the media had made it quite impossible for Washington to maintain even the minimal material and moral support that would have enabled the Saigon regime to continue effective resistance’ (Elegant 1981, p. 73). The belief that the media was responsible for the US defeat in Vietnam shaped the military’s attitudes towards and relations with the media and ‘became a defining feature of the US military’s public affairs policy for the next quarter century. The lesson, translated into practical advice for future operations, was that the press needed to be treated like an adversary and that media access to the battlefield should be strictly denied’ (Rid 2007, pp. 62–63).

During the First Persian Gulf War in 1991, the Americans applied this lesson to the 1600 media professionals who descended on Saudi Arabia after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990. Around 200 of these reporters, formed into Media Reporting Teams (MRTs), were granted access to the troops in forward areas to provide pooled dispatches for their colleagues in the rear. Their movements closely monitored by military Public Affairs Officers (PAOs), the journalists were completely at the mercy of their uniformed minders for access to and transport within the area of operations, and for the review and transmission of their copy, which was dispatched via military communications systems. When Operation Desert Shield became Operation Desert Storm on 17 January 1991 and the bombing campaign to liberate Kuwait began, despite their greater proximity to the action, the MRT reporters were little better off than the ‘hotel warriors’ back in Riyadh and Dhahran, sitting through the US military’s official briefings, cheering the smart-bomb footage and guffawing at General Norman Schwartzkopf’s leaden jokes. The military’s comprehensive control over the media seemed to provide ‘a classic example of how to project a desired view of conflict in the new informational environment that had emerged during the 1980s’ (Taylor 2003, p. 287). Yet this was not the media management triumph that it appeared. John J. Fialka observed that ‘[w]ithin hours of the launching’ of the ground offensive on 24 February, ‘[t]he Army-designed pony express system of couriers and its teams of reporter escorts’ collapsed:

‘nearly 80 per cent of reports filed took more than 12 hours to get back to Dhahran. One in ten took three days or more’ (1991, p. 11; Carruthers 2000, p. 141). As a consequence, despite the new 24-hour coverage of events, the reporting of the First Gulf War was notable for its significant absences, its tardiness, and its failure to provide contemporary coverage of any of the war’s major battles. In the aftermath of the fighting, despite Defence Public Affairs chief Pete Williams’ claim that the American people had enjoyed ‘the best war coverage they ever had’ (cited in Cumings 1992, p. 117). Peter Braestrup condemned the media’s Gulf War experience as ‘high-cost, low-benefit horde journalism’ and put ‘[b]oth Washington policymakers and senior Army officers’ on notice that they ‘should not embrace the notion that handling the media Gulf War-style is the way to do things next time...“Next time” will be different’ (Braestrup 2000, p. xiii).

The US experience in the Gulf demonstrated that ‘the new informational environment that had emerged during the 1980s’ had made the lessons of Vietnam redundant. While military commanders in the Gulf corralled the media, drip-fed them a diet of good news, and busied themselves with degrading the local infrastructure, the Iraqis seized the ‘information initiative’ (Rid 2007, p. 84). Minders from the Iraqi Information Ministry undercut the US effort to portray the war as a bloodless exercise in precision bombing by directing Western news crews to evidence of the human cost of the bombardment. On the night of 13 February 1991, US precision-guided bombs hit a command and control bunker in al-Amiriya that was being used as a civilian air-raid shelter, incinerating hundreds of old people, women, and children. The Iraqis bussed the international press corps to the site where they ‘filmed scenes of charred human remains being removed from the ravaged building... The footage was revelatory, as grief-stricken survivors unwrapped bundles of molten human flesh’ (Carruthers 2000, p. 139). Outgunned on the battlefield, the Iraqis exploited their information assets to undermine the coalition cause.

Far from demonstrating the defeat and humiliation of the media, the First Gulf War provided an object lesson in how badly the military needed them. The *Gulf War Air Power Survey* (1993) recognised that, like Saddam Hussein, future adversaries would deploy sophisticated information operations to undermine public support for a given campaign. In their efforts to achieve ‘full spectrum dominance’, militaries were going to need the media to tell their stories. As a result, provision

for adequate press coverage had to be regarded as ‘an unavoidable yet important part of military operations’ (Olson 1993, p. 135). Just how important was reflected during Operation Allied Force, NATO’s 1999 effort to halt the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo’s Albanian population during the Yugoslav Civil War, where its greater force of arms was frustrated by Serbia’s domination of the information space. Due to the exclusively airborne nature of the operation, there were no friendly ground forces with which correspondents might embed to report on events on the ground as they occurred. The Serbs adroitly exploited this gaping hole in NATO’s information operations planning. On 14 April 1999, near the village of Djakovica, around 70 civilians were killed when US Air Force F-16s mistook a convoy of agricultural vehicles for a Serb armoured column and bombed it. Serb authorities transported Western journalists to the site of the bombing and expedited the transmission of their copy. The resulting images of ‘mangled tractors and minibuses...burned and bloodied corpses...limbs scattered among destroyed vehicles’ and their accompanying reports ran constantly on CNN over the following days and made front-page headlines in both the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* (Rid 2007, p. 98). By contrast, it took five days for NATO to concede responsibility for the mistake, by which time it had ceded the information advantage to the Serbs and paid the price in damaged legitimacy and rising public disapproval of the campaign.¹

Three weeks later, misled by an out-dated map, NATO jets struck the wrong target again, in this case the Chinese Embassy compound in Belgrade, where three people were killed and fifteen wounded. Once again, while NATO dithered over an official response, the Serbs exploited their advantage, claiming that it was their civilian population, and not the Kosovars or the Bosnians, who were the victims of indiscriminate assault from heavily armed opponents. Information dominance brought the Serbs concrete military benefits. In the wake of the Djakovica attack, NATO cancelled daytime sorties and then abandoned the bombing of Belgrade after the Chinese Embassy incident. Its Supreme Commander, US General Wesley Clark, conceded that ‘The weight of public opinion was doing to us what the Serb air defence system had failed to do: limit our strikes’ (2001, p. 444). Chastened by this experience, US commanders realised that force of arms alone could not guarantee victory and that wars also had to be won in the information environment. Like their nimbler adversaries, the military had to move its approach to information management from defence to attack, to treat

information as a weapon as well as a shield: ‘the US military needed to engage in what doctrine would call counter propaganda activities’, and to do that they had to integrate public affairs into strategic planning, to bring the media onto the battlefield with the freedom and the technical means to tell the story (Rid 2007, p. 87).

In late 2002, as the US prepared for a second invasion of Iraq in little more than a decade, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, Victoria Clarke, set out to persuade her boss, the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, that if the military were to dominate the information sphere, they would have to take the media with them into battle. The embedding of reporters had a ‘strategic function in the overall war plan and had been designed to achieve five specific objectives: to preempt and counter Iraqi disinformation; to encourage dissent and defection among Iraqi civilians and fighting men; to publicise the successes of the US invasion; to manage the public’s expectations about what might be achieved in Iraq; and to achieve and maintain information dominance’ (Rid 2007, p. 133). Having won Rumsfeld’s support, Clarke’s office issued the Public Affairs Guidance (PAG) document on 10 February 2003 that laid out the responsibilities and duties of the military and the media around access to the area of operations, freedom of movement within it, and the review and transmission of copy. It required the military to ‘ensure that the media were provided with every opportunity to observe actual combat operations’ (Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs 2003, 3G).² They had to furnish seats on ‘priority inter-theater airlift’ to make sure that reporters could get to the fighting and then assist them in the timely transmission of the copy gathered there (2.C.2). Just as ‘no communications equipment for use by media in the conduct of their duties will be specifically prohibited’, so there would be ‘no general review process for media products’ (2.C.4; 3.R). The PAG’s specific provisions underwrote the broader political commitment to openness and democracy: ‘Our ultimate strategic success in bringing peace and security to this region will come in our long-term commitment to supporting our democratic ideals. We need to tell the factual story—good or bad—before others seed the media with disinformation and distortions’ (2.A). In light of this, the PAG explicitly forbade any attempt to ‘prevent the release of derogatory, embarrassing, negative or uncomplimentary information’ (4).

By contrast, the principal goals of the ADF’s media management policies and practices in Afghanistan were, for almost the entire period of

its deployment there, to keep the fourth estate at arm's length from the military, impede their access to the nation's forces, curtail their freedom of movement, assign escort officers to shadow the reporters, and subject their copy to review. While the US military's media relations were transformed between the First and Second Gulf Wars by bitter experience, the ADF's practices in Afghanistan and its identification of the media as the enemy were shaped by its misremembering of the 'lessons of Vietnam'. During and after the fighting in Vietnam, there was a growing conviction in Australia that if the media had not actually conspired to lose the war, it had certainly 'maligned the troops after so wholeheartedly supporting them', and so fomented public resentment against them and the war as a whole (Ham 2007, p. 415). This belief reflected a broader tendency to conflate the US and Australian experiences of the Vietnam War to the point where, Jeffrey Grey noted, 'our "memories" of the war are shaped and coloured by American responses to the American experience' (2010, p. 211). With specific regard to the media, Rodney Tiffen warned that it was 'a fundamental mistake...to think the debate about American media coverage of the [Vietnam] war can be simply translated to Australia' (2009, p. 118). The resourcing and professional practices of the Australian reporters in Vietnam and the purported effects of their coverage were far removed from those of their US counterparts: 'Just as Australia's military commitment was disproportionately smaller than America's, so was Australia's journalistic commitment...The number of Australian correspondents in Vietnam at any one time never numbered more than a handful, while during peaks of newsworthiness there were several hundred from the United States' (p. 126). During the most newsworthy peak of all, the Tet offensive of 1968, while dozens of US journalists reported from Saigon, Danang, Hue, and other key sites, Australia had only a handful of reporters in country.³ Some Australian newspapers failed to muster a single visitor to the war: 'The *Sydney Morning Herald*, which had sent more correspondents to World War II than any other Australian newspaper, did not manage to send one to Vietnam' (Anderson and Trembath 2011, p. 231). Consequently, the principal 'source of material for Australian newspapers came from the international news agencies' (Tiffen 2009, p. 166). With the news covered, Australian media outlets were free to pursue a personal angle on the war. Pat Burgess, who covered the war for Fairfax, noted that his employers 'didn't want news, they were going to rely on the agency for news...they only wanted airmailers...a feature type story' (cited in Payne 2007, p. 17).

Despite an impasto of cooperation, the military was determined to keep the reporters at arm's length: 'A telegram from Austforce, Vietnam, to the Department of the Army in Canberra stated that their senior officers "had been advised on a confidential basis that they should as far as possible avoid contact with press representatives without making it obvious that they are doing so"' (Anderson and Trembath 2011, p. 237). But it was perfectly obvious to some. Tim Bowden recalls that 'Unlike the Americans and other allied groups fighting in South Vietnam, the Australians did not welcome foreign correspondents; they had a deep seated distrust of the press. It was known in the trade as the "feel free to fuck off" approach to public relations' (Bowden 1987, p. 141).⁴ Those who chose not to fuck off were subjected to intrusive oversight. Creighton Burns of *The Age* recalled that 'you couldn't talk to an Australian soldier without the presence of an officer there' (cited in Anderson 2009, p. 127), a practice Denis Warner designated 'the most blatant attempt to impose censorship at source that I have ever encountered in any Army in any war at any time' (cited in Payne 2007, p. 5).

The military's constraints on the reporters were complemented by explicit directions from their employers. John Mancy and Alan Ramsey of AAP 'were told to stick to reporting stories and not to carry out investigative pieces or editorialise' while the ABC imposed 'strict guidelines' dictating 'what its news division staff could say and could not say' which resulted in the prohibition of 'any form of commentary' (Anderson and Trembath 2011, p. 234). As a consequence of direct government intrusion, military obstruction, and the publishers' and broadcasters' editorial policies, Rodney Tiffen argued that the Australian media's coverage of the Vietnam War 'was overwhelmingly timid,' exhibiting 'less independent probing, less willingness to devote adequate resources to reporting the war, and a far more restricted range of opinion and analysis' than their foreign counterparts, resulting in coverage somewhere between 'general support' and vociferous partisanship (2009, p. 184). In light of this damning judgment, the military concluded that its policies of limited contact with the media and strict control over their movements and copy had been vindicated. Accordingly, while the Americans learned from the First Gulf War and Kosovo that the lessons of Vietnam had failed, that the media were not the enemy but an important ally, the ADF hung onto the lessons it learned in Phuoc Tuy and carried its memories of them and the hostility they bred towards the fourth estate all the way to Uruzgan.

The nature and scope of Australian reporting from Afghanistan was also shaped by the size, purpose, and geographical location of the ADF commitment. At the highpoint of its commitment in December 2012, Australia contributed around 1550 troops to NATO's International Security Assistance Force mission, of whom a little over 1200 were deployed in Uruzgan province and the remainder in Kabul, Kandahar, and elsewhere in Afghanistan and the Gulf States.⁵ This commitment was a fraction of that of the senior coalition partners, the US and Britain, making it one of the 'minor players in the Afghanistan experiment' (Cantwell 2012, p. 30).⁶ Further, Uruzgan is 'one of the most remote and forgotten provinces of Afghanistan' and 'remains one of the poorest and least developed' (Yeaman 2013, p. 32). The critical front lines of the conflict were located to the east on the border with Pakistan, or deeper to the south in the Pashtu heartlands of Kandahar and Helmand. As such, whatever the ADF might have achieved in Uruzgan, it had little impact on the ultimate outcome of the struggle. Correspondingly, the fate of the Afghans and their country was of little concern to Australians for whom Afghanistan was always more a war than a country. The fighting there mattered to Australians because it revealed *who* the men and women of the armed forces were, not *what* they did. Accordingly, the ADF was highly sensitive about how it was portrayed by the fourth estate and for the greater period of its deployment it retained a tight grip over who in the media went to Afghanistan, where they could travel once there, what they saw, and who they could meet.

This determination to limit the media's access and curtail their freedom of movement put the ADF's information management practices sharply at odds with those of their coalition allies from Canada and the Netherlands. In their study of Dutch embedded journalism in Afghanistan, *Eyes Wide Shut?* (2008), Mans et al. examined seven factors that had determined Dutch media coverage of the nation's military operations—media management policy, selection of reporters, timing of their visits, facilitation of access, freedom of movement, control over content, and sanctions.⁷ Given that the Australian, Dutch, and Canadian militaries performed broadly similar roles with roughly equivalent force commitments, these criteria provide a useful basis on which comparisons between their approaches to military-media relations in Afghanistan and their outcomes might be based.⁸

Dutch military-media relations were framed by an explicit communications policy document, the *Communicatieplan*, whose purpose was

‘to showcase the importance and the developments of the mission and its specific assignments in a professional manner’, for a variety of audiences, ‘the public, visitors, politicians and others that are involved’ (cited in Mans et al. 2008, p. 15). To meet these goals, Dr. Joop Veen, the Director of Communications at the *Ministerie van Defensie* (MvD) recalled, ‘we decided to have embedded journalism, we decided to have combat camera teams permanently over there in the field’.⁹ The MvD offered Dutch reporters free transport to Afghanistan, free accommodation and personal safety equipment, and made available three embed places of two weeks duration on a rolling basis. Robin Middel, former Spokesman for the Chief of Defence and Head of Operations in the Directorate of Information and Communications at the MvD, noted that the duration of the two-week embed was intended to ensure that the reporters retained their objectivity: ‘we thought if you stay longer... you will get too much involved in what the troops are doing, you get too much...part of the family’.¹⁰ The selection process for embed places was open and transparent. As Hans de Vreij of Radio Netherlands observed, there were ‘never any problems with the defence ministry’ around arranging trips to Afghanistan.¹¹

The MvD did not actively select or nominate particular journalists for deployment. In theory, any journalist from any Dutch news organisation could ask to go. The MvD did seek to maintain a balance between print, television and radio reporters, defence, political and development coverage, and harder and softer news, thus ensuring breadth of coverage. Robin Middel recalled that alongside the development reporters and the defence correspondents ‘we took the less serious media in, we took radio reporters in and...one of the more popular Dutch DJs, [who] made a broadcast every day for three hours from the camp. All that kind of experiments we had and we never had a problem’.¹² The timing of visits to Afghanistan was the responsibility of the MvD. Reporters submitted their requests for embeds to the MvD’s Public Information Department. The department then liaised with the Public Information Officers (PIO) in Uruzgan who were responsible for the overall coordination of visits as they were affected by planned operations and developments on the ground. The commander in Uruzgan determined whether it was possible for journalists to join specific operations at particular times. The MvD and its PIOs in theatre were tasked with facilitating media access to all aspects of the Dutch mission in Afghanistan—even Special Forces. An occasional point of friction was the right of more senior officers in the

field to overrule a PIO's decision about media access. When conflicts of this kind arose, Robin Middel recalled that if there was no compelling operational argument against the media's inclusion, the PIO's decision generally stood.

The Dutch reporter was free to go wherever he or she wished on base, and to visit PRT projects and accompany Dutch military patrols off it. There was, technically, a requirement that a PIO accompany the reporter at all times and that all interviews were on the record, but this regulation was rarely observed. Jaus Müller of the Dutch daily *NRC Handelsblad* noted, 'I could talk to everyone...Everything was totally open'.¹³ Dutch journalists were also free to disembark from the military, to leave the base to cover accessible stories in civilian areas before re-embedding and returning to the security of the base. Peter ter Velde from the Dutch broadcaster NOS regarded the opportunity to disembark as less a choice than a responsibility to ensure that the Dutch public had access to a properly balanced account of what its troops and development partners were doing in Afghanistan and whether the goals they had set themselves were being realised: 'if you travel with the military you have a one-sided story and only if you also got unembedded then you got the other side of the story and it's the only way it works...I think in order to show what's going on here you have to do both'.¹⁴

The main bone of contention between Dutch reporters and the MvD was over control of copy. The MvD enforced universal copy review. All material had to be submitted to a PIO to ensure that there were no inadvertent breaches of operational security. Some journalists accepted this as a reasonable condition of access, some welcomed the clear parameters it brought, while others vigorously opposed it. Hans de Vreij 'found it quite naïve and I still find it quite naïve of journalists to think that they can go along with the military, attend meetings, hear deep background stuff and not submit their material to a censor'.¹⁵ Jaus Müller 'wasn't happy with it...I think it's bad, I think it's, it's almost like a censor. It's a principle, it's a principle of handing over your material and get[ting] comment and then publish it, it's totally weird'.¹⁶ However, censorship was rarely a practical issue and there were few cases that could not be resolved through discussion or appeal.¹⁷ In the event of a reporter publishing or broadcasting forbidden or contested material, the MvD had no formal provision for sanctions against those who contravened its directives.

When the Canadian media followed their troops to Kandahar in early 2002, they did so in the context of a recent history of deeply strained

relations with the armed forces. A series of military scandals through the 1990s—the torture and murder of a Somali teenager by members of the Airborne Regiment in 1993, violent hazing rituals in 1995, and in 1998, allegations that sexual assaults within the forces had been inadequately investigated—had been exposed and aggressively pursued by the media. As a result of the ensuing investigations, the military lost public respect and political support, its personnel numbers nosedived, and its budget was slashed. While the decision to commit troops to Afghanistan offered Canadian Forces (CF) and the Department of National Defence (DND) an opportunity to rebuild their relations with politicians and the Canadian public, it soon became clear that this would require a new approach to military-media relations and the development of new policy documents to articulate them. When, in late 2001, the Canadian Government agreed to commit forces to Afghanistan, ‘Public Affairs doctrine had not been updated since the late 1980s, and there existed no official policy for dealing with media in-theatre’ (Price 2009, p. 39). Accordingly, for eighteen months, from December 2001 to June 2003, the military worked on a detailed agreement governing its interactions with the fourth estate, the *Canadian Forces Media Embedding Program* (CFMEP).¹⁸ From the time it came into operation in September 2003, when Canadian Forces re-deployed to Kabul, the CFMEP was regularly reviewed and revised in the light of experience and consultation.¹⁹ Notably, from its inception the CFMEP was not only intended to address operational security requirements, media needs, and direct commanders on how to deal with information management problems as they arose, its principal goal, like the *Communicatieplan*, was to serve the public, to ensure that relevant policies were in place ‘to inform Canadians about the role, mandate and activities of the Canadian Forces (CF) on deployed operation’ (Canadian Expeditionary Force Command 2010, p. 1).

In its efforts to facilitate this, the agreement made provision for the embedding of 30 journalists with CF at any one time.²⁰ Between February and August 2002, during the first rotation of its forces in Kandahar, CF hosted 20–30 Canadian reporters. For the sixteen-month period between January 2006 and mid-April 2007, when the Canadians returned to Kandahar, 230 journalists embedded with CF, ‘an average of 80–90 embeds per [six-month] rotation,’ reflecting the exponential increase in public interest in the deployment (Hobson 2007, p. 12).²¹ After a few teething problems, the selection process for embeds

settled into a transparent and orderly routine. Reporters intending to visit Afghanistan detailed the sorts of stories they were hoping to cover (e.g., combat, political, reconstruction, women), Public Affairs personnel at the DND in Ottawa endeavoured to arrange access, and the journalists were then allocated a spot on a relevant rotation.²² The timing of media visits to Afghanistan was dictated by the availability of places and the matching of reporters to the issues they hoped to cover. Technically, any Canadian or foreign reporter could embed with CF provided a spot was available, though the prohibitive cost of insurance largely restricted participation to the national media.²³ The Canadians required the media to make their own way to Kandahar and to furnish their own protective equipment.

While some Canadian reporters spoke approvingly of the CFs readiness to facilitate their access to operations and projects in Afghanistan—Gloria Galloway of the *Globe and Mail* thought that the PA officers she had worked with were ‘terrific’—others were less complimentary.²⁴ Stephen Thorne of the Canadian Press (CP) described the PAOs he had dealt with in Kandahar and Kabul earlier in the campaign as ‘a real pain the ass’.²⁵ Canadian reporters, unlike their Dutch colleagues, retained control over their copy. Briefed about forbidden topics and warned off operationally sensitive issues, they were free to write and shoot as they saw fit. The CF reserved the right to sanction reporters for breaches of the policy, rescinding their embedded status and excluding them from Kandahar Airfield when such infractions occurred. Stephen Thorne recalled ‘a couple of times when [Canadian PAOs] kicked me off the base...and then once I got kicked off the base by the US commander’—for photographing the return to Kandahar Airfield of the bodies of four US Engineers killed in an explosion.²⁶ More often, where problems arose, as with the Dutch, the reporters and the PA personnel on the ground, or their editors and more senior PA officers in Ottawa, did their best to resolve disputes, and where appropriate amended the embedding agreement to reflect changed conditions.

In the absence of any publicly available doctrine detailing the goals shaping Australian coverage of the fighting in Afghanistan and the means by which they might be achieved, it is a moot point whether the Department of Defence and the ADF actually had a policy dictating its relations with the media in Afghanistan.²⁷ The former Director General of Communication Strategies for the Department of Defence, Brian Humphreys, noted that as of 2009, the ADF, like the Department of

Defence, ‘has no formal strategy for media relations’ (Humphreys 2009, pp. 31–32). In the absence of a developed media strategy, the ADF’s dealings with the fourth estate were mostly reactive, shaped by historical antagonism, false memories of the Vietnam experience, and short-term, tactical considerations, as was reflected in its approach to embedding. By its own admission, the ADF followed the ‘slow road to media embedding’ and took almost a decade to implement a basic program (Logue 2013, p. 14). In late 2010, nine years after Australian forces first arrived in Afghanistan, the Department of Defence claimed that ‘Following a review of embedding policy and a trial deployment in 2009,’ the ADF ‘now conducts an embedding program.’²⁸ They were a little quick off the mark. In 2010, just as there was no trace of the ‘embedding policy’ referred to by Defence, there was no evidence of the system, routine, or procedures that one ordinarily associates with a ‘program’. There was no publicly available information about how a correspondent might apply or qualify for an embed place or about Defence and the ADF’s priorities in their allocation. While Defence noted that ‘The ADF embed program offers access to the MTF [Mentoring Task Force] for two representatives from a single media agency for up to 21 days,’ there was no information about what might dictate the timing of embeds or how they might relate to specific operations.²⁹ The scarcity of Australian embed places—‘Each MTF rotation will host a minimum of two embed cycles’—should be set beside the Canadian average of 80–90 embed cycles per rotation when its system was working at its height.³⁰ While the Canadians had almost twice as many troops as the Australians in Afghanistan, they offered their media 40 or 45 times as many embed opportunities per rotation. A difference of this magnitude suggests far more about the priority the CF and the ADF accord to public information than it does about their relative capacity to absorb and facilitate the media. It implies that the purpose of the ADF’s ‘program’ was less to ensure that public were kept informed about what its troops were doing in Afghanistan than it was to forestall criticism that it was not informing them at all.

Reporters who embedded with the ADF in Afghanistan offered mixed reviews of its readiness to facilitate access to operations. Some praised the energy and understanding of PA officers who did everything in their power to ensure access to operations.³¹ Others complained about command interference in their plans and movements and the inability of the PAO to exercise any leverage in these disputes.³² Notably, many Australian reporters seem to have had a mixed experience. Nick Butterly

of the *West Australian*, noted that on his first embed, in 2010, he was ‘incredibly lucky to have been partnered with the media liaison officer I was given. He was keenly interested in newspapers and always wanting to push the bounds of the embed as far as we could.’ He went on to observe that he had ‘since heard some horror stories of other reporters being saddled with media liaison officers who saw their jobs purely in terms of shutting down awkward stories and pedalling positive ones’ (cited in Logue 2013, p. 48). A number of mid-ranking officers showed an admirable openness to the media and did their utmost to facilitate coverage. ‘Unlike some of his colleagues’, the Commanding Officer of Mentoring and Reconstruction Task Force (MRTF) 1, Lieutenant Colonel Shane Gabriel, believed that it was important for the fourth estate to bear witness from the front lines: ‘The media has a right to be there. We have nothing to hide’ (cited in Masters 2012, p. 200). Likewise, when Chris Masters and his film crew arrived at Patrol Base Wali, the officer commanding, Major Jason Groat, emerged from his command post to inform the reporters that ‘We are welcome inside at any time and have an open invitation to every daily briefing’ (p. 227). But it wasn’t all ‘hail-fellow-well-met’. When Paul McGeough and photographer Kate Geraghty of Fairfax travelled to Tarin Kot in January 2013 to report on the current state of affairs in Uruzgan as the ADF began its withdrawal, they were ‘met on the tarmac by several Australian military officers’ who told them ‘You have no permission to be here.’ Determined to avoid the ADF’s restrictions on reporters, McGeough and Geraghty sought accreditation for their assignment from an Afghan agency and travelled to Uruzgan independent of the ADF. Apprised of this strategy, McGeough alleges, the ADF set out to ‘derail the Fairfax assignment’, and so ‘block independent reporting in the province’. They did this by holding a meeting with spokesmen ‘from a raft of government agencies in southern Afghanistan’ where the Afghans were pressured to withdraw any offers of assistance they may already have made to the Fairfax journalists. Farid Ayil, a spokesman for the Uruzgan Chief of Police, Matiullah Khan, corroborated McGeough’s account, claiming that ‘The [ADF] guy went around the table getting everyone to say they had refused.’ When it became clear that the Chief of Police had not refused and had determined to host the journalists, the unnamed ADF officer ‘demanded to know why we were taking you’ and presented ‘a litany of reasons’ to back his arguments for excluding the reporters: ‘the Fairfax team was in Oruzgan to “write wrong

stories”; it had travelled to Tarin Kowt “without permission”; and it had entered Afghanistan “without a letter from the Australian government” (McGeough 2013, p. 9). Though the journalists had neither written nor photographed anything at this point, in the eyes of the ADF officers on the ground, the fact that they were intending to work beyond military oversight was evidence of their hostility towards the Australian armed forces and a legitimate basis for excluding them. Thus the Australian military’s corporate memory of Vietnam strikes again.

For Australian reporters who made it to Afghanistan, there was no such thing as an off-the-record interview with ADF personnel. *The Statement of Understanding for Accredited Media* notes that ‘the correspondent will be escorted at all times’, and must ‘adhere to the direction and advice of the military escort officer at all times’ or face removal from the area of operations (Department of Defence).³³ In reality, the escort system worked in a variety of ways. Some reporters relied on their PA escorts for advice and direction, others ignored them, and some dispensed with their services altogether.³⁴ A number of journalists have noted that it was easier to secure off-the-record comments once they were beyond the wire.³⁵ Others were given total freedom to talk to whomever they wanted.³⁶

There was no provision for or experience of Australian reporters moving between embedded and disembedded status. Reporters were expected to remain under the direction of the responsible commander. Should the correspondent elect to forfeit the protection of the ADF, the embed would be considered at an end. The review of copy was also a grey area. Despite Defence’s assertion that it ‘does not exert editorial control over reporting by journalists during [their] visits other than ensuring that operational security is not breached’, the process for ensuring that there were no breaches of operational security was the moot point here.³⁷ Writing in 2013, Jason Logue noted that the ADF exercised ‘100 per cent review of all media embed participant material before filing’ and that ‘Australia is the only nation in ISAF that still requires this level of oversight’ (Logue 2013, p. 33). In practice the system worked a little less rigidly in that, while some reporters had their work routinely screened, others did not.³⁸

That the ADF was offering any embeds at all was a notable advance on the earlier situation. Ian McPhedran notes that by 2009 the ADF’s restrictions on media reporting had grown so obstructive that ‘there is more value in Australian reporters seeking help from British or American

or Dutch or Romanian forces on operations than there is from the Australians' (2009, p. 71). Prior to the introduction of a formal embedding program, the only way for Australian reporters to access their troops in Afghanistan was via the 'bus tours' that the ADF used to bring the Australian media to the joint Dutch-Australian base outside Tarin Kot (Middleton 2009, p. 148).³⁹ The tours ran intermittently from 2002, and then more regularly from 2008. ADF PA officers not only 'fixed' the reporters' itineraries 'well in advance' but 'chaperoned' them 'every step of the way' once they were on base (Hobbs 2009, p. 92). The standard schedule took the journalists past a selection of prestige training and reconstruction projects—most notably the trade-training school and the Tarin Kot Provincial Hospital—and exposed them to selected personnel primed to respond to the reporters' questions. Little was left to chance. SBS's Chief Political Correspondent and a regular visitor to Afghanistan, Karen Middleton, noted that the ADF's determination to minimise the scope for surprises or negative publicity ensured that, as a journalist with the ADF, 'You can't be sure what will happen during your allotted time in country or what kind of stories you will be able to do...You can be absolutely certain you will be subject to considerable restriction' (Middleton 2009, p. 152).

The ADF considered the bus trips a vital means of promoting its mission in Uruzgan, but later conceded that they had persisted with them for too long: 'The decision to operate this way made sense during the initial phases of the conflicts [in Iraq and Afghanistan] with their heavy Special Forces presence, but once large bodies of conventional troops were on the ground, Defence's ongoing justification became untenable. The negative comparison between the coalition approaches became the subject of increasing political pressure' (Logue 2013, pp. 13–14). Though the bus tours may have been 'of very limited value' to the media, they were highly revealing of the military's practices and priorities (McPhedran 2009, p. 71). The *Australian's* Mark Dodd noted that the centrepiece of any media visit to Camp Holland was the Tarin Kot Provincial Hospital, recently refurbished by the Australians. Yet the renovation of the hospital, and the addition of a maternity wing, was not the good-news story it seemed. While the ADF was 'rightfully proud' of this achievement and visitors were 'inevitably...briefed about the showcase project', few saw it in operation, as 'no foreign aid organisation has been willing to staff the hospital or provide the sort of support envisaged' (Dodd 2008, p. 11).⁴⁰

After repeated complaints from the media about lack of access, the ADF conducted an embedding trial in August 2009 and introduced a formal embedding program in early 2010.⁴¹ Even then a number of Australian journalists pointed out that the ADF version of embedding was ‘more constraining than it needs to be’ (Middleton 2009, p. 155).⁴² Jason Logue’s 2013 review of the ADF embedding program reveals that its tardy introduction and unnecessarily restrictive nature ultimately did the military more harm than good. His analysis of the 2011 coverage revealed that while ‘the overall trend of Australian media reporting concerning operations in Afghanistan was favourable...the coverage sourced from media embed participants, a relatively small percentage of overall coverage, was of considerably higher favourability than reporting from afar.’ Better still, the embeds’ reporting was not only favourable, it ‘showed a strong correlation with the identified favourable messages’, the preferred narrative of the war that the ADF was keen to promote, namely ‘the ADF supporting its personnel, the military/personal conduct of ADF personnel as “beyond reproach” and that ADF operations were making progress towards strategic goals’ (Logue 2013, pp. 26–27).⁴³ Logue’s findings suggest that ADF commanders may look to sanction the more-timely introduction of embedding in future conflicts.

The ADF’s determination to retain strict control over how it was portrayed, and the false memories of the Vietnam Experience that helped shape this policy, had far-reaching and inadvertently negative effects on the broader representation of the war, and thereby on public support for it. Excluded from the front lines, the conflict dropped off the nation’s front pages and the Australian media tended to focus on the war only when members of the ADF were killed or seriously wounded. This narrowed public discussion about the war and distorted the nation’s understanding of and responses to it. For example, for the greater part of a decade ‘at least half of Australia’s Afghanistan story...the other story, of the fight being taken to the Taliban...had gone untold’ and, as a consequence, the public had little idea of just how aggressive the ADF campaign had been (Masters 2012, p. 255). Chris Masters notes that ‘In 2007 alone, Australian Special Forces killed and identified more than 400 Taliban’ (p. 14). Four years later, in May 2011, the *West Australian* reported that ‘Australian forces have killed about 1500 insurgents in the past 12 months, during some of the most vicious fighting seen by the military since the Vietnam War’ (Probyn and Butterly 2011). Perhaps surprisingly, the ADF ‘drew no attention’ to these numbers, while the

Special Forces personnel responsible for them were ‘determinedly off limits’ to the media (Masters 2012, p. 14, 255). The resulting focus on the casualties suffered by the ADF rather than those they had inflicted ensured that the only body count the Australian public became familiar with was its own.

In parliament, where there was bipartisan support for the deployment, the conflict most often attracted broader public attention when the Prime Minister rose to lead a condolence motion. Over the succeeding days, in a now familiar choreography of collective grief, the media revealed more about the age, marital status, dependents, affiliations, and personal qualities of the casualty (‘the fallen’), before focusing on the formal farewelling of the body from Afghanistan (‘sombre procession’), its repatriation to Australia (‘solemn ramp ceremony’), and the funeral, with full military honours (‘flag-draped coffin...an awaiting gun carriage’), attended by the nation’s most senior political and military officials (‘supreme sacrifice’). In light of this focus on the ADF’s losses, and the sacramental vocabulary used to commemorate them, ‘It is not hard to understand why a sense of Australians as more victim than victor had formed’, and why, as a result, public disapproval of the war continued to rise (Masters 2012, p. 14).

Yet blame for the poverty of Australian coverage of the war does not rest with Defence and the ADF alone. Throughout the course of the war in Afghanistan, at the very time that reporters and editors should have been leading—or at least prompting—a national conversation about the ADF’s role and purposes there, they were distracted by the greatest crisis confronting the mainstream media in its modern history: the demise of its traditional funding model. The collapse of the industry’s conventional sources of funding threw it into turmoil and led to massive job losses among editorial staff.⁴⁴ Foreign bureaux were closed, specialist reporters with foreign and defence experience took redundancy packages, and their expertise was lost to the industry.⁴⁵ As a consequence, the mainstream media in Australia today employs only a handful of dedicated defence correspondents.⁴⁶ The macroeconomic circumstances meant that already ‘one of the toughest assignments on the media horizon’, the truth about what was happening in Afghanistan was ‘harder than usual to come by’ (Masters 2012, p. 207). Yet while Government and Defence routinely spun the news to ‘shape and misshape the truth’ for their own ends and the ADF maintained its stranglehold over access to and freedom of movement within the area of operations, it became increasingly

apparent that the ‘lack of evidence based coverage’ of what Australian forces were doing in Afghanistan was ‘not only down to the ADF being obstructive’ or fourth estate’s straitened resources (p. 207; also Masters 2011, p. 37). Journalists recognised that among the newspapers and broadcasters they served, ‘editorial commitment’ to reporting the war was ‘weak’ and there was ‘no appetite for sustained and detailed coverage except when there was an extraordinary event’ (p. 37).⁴⁷ This was evidenced in both incidental and more substantial demonstrations of the media’s reluctance to vigorously pursue the story. In some cases, media organisations were disinclined to meet the full costs of transporting or insuring reporters who went to cover the war.⁴⁸ In others, they balked at the bonuses and allowances to which their employees were entitled.⁴⁹ More damningly, over the course of the conflict the media were loath to invest in the requisite personnel or resources to ensure that the public had access to sustained and comprehensive coverage. For more than nine years no Australian media outlet stationed a permanent correspondent in Afghanistan. In January 2011, the ABC finally opened a Kabul bureau headed by Sally Sara, yet when her posting ended twelve months later, it promptly mothballed the office.⁵⁰ In the absence of a permanent cadre of well-informed specialists, coverage of the war was left to a shifting band of differently qualified reporters who dropped in on brief embeds before leaving the country, and their readers, little wiser about the conflict than they were before. As a consequence of these arrangements, the greater portion of the reporting from Afghanistan struggled to illuminate the war’s complex origins, geography, and alliances, falling back on the reliable staples of death, injury, and the occasional scandal.

The distinguishing features of Dutch, Canadian, and Australian information management systems reveal the critical components enabling fruitful relations between the military and the media. The success of the Dutch system can be traced back to the highest levels of government. Driven by the political imperative to inform the people about what its forces were doing in Afghanistan, the military observed the directions of their political masters and collaborated with the media to ensure that a balanced picture of the Dutch deployment emerged. Relations with the media remained cooperative because they were founded on doctrine that both parties had had a hand in developing and fine-tuning, that clearly set out each party’s rights and responsibilities and provided a baseline for dispute resolution. In Canada, the military and the media gradually worked through their mutual suspicion and with the assistance

of doctrine that both parties had invested in, arrived at a working relationship that, for a couple of years, delivered the media ‘excellent access’ to the troops and mutual benefits for both parties. In Australia, by contrast, there was neither political leadership driving an open information policy nor the military doctrine needed to manage the operation of such a system. For the greater part of the conflict, while the government was focused on minimising bad news, the ADF held fast to the antagonism towards the fourth estate that its memories of Vietnam fed. In the absence of information management doctrine to which both parties had contributed and in which both could invest, there was little or no common ground on which fundamental issues might be raised or minor disputes resolved. The ADF’s principal media operations goals focused on promoting the actions of its personnel in Afghanistan and defending its reputation from what it believed was a media cohort intent on finding fault and besmirching the military brand. While the military and the media squabbled over access, freedom of movement, and control of copy, the biggest loser was the Australian public. Denied the detailed, comprehensive, consistent coverage that a thorough understanding of the war in Afghanistan demanded, they were left to decipher the relations between an unbroken flow of upbeat press releases celebrating military and civil society gains and the steadily rising body count. The revolution in information management that had catalyzed a new age of military-media relations in the US, Canada, and the Netherlands barely registered in Australia. While there is no guarantee that more information would have improved public support for the war in Afghanistan, it would certainly have ensured that the nation’s longest war was not also its worst reported and least understood.

NOTES

1. Of the 23,000 bombs dropped by NATO during Operation Allied Force, Jamie Shea claims, implausibly, that only 30 or 0.0013% failed to hit the intended target (see Shea 2002, p. 157). Whatever the accuracy of his claim, it is a mark of the deftness of the Yugoslav information campaign that it was able to make effective propaganda capital out of a small amount of misdirected ordnance.
2. For further information on how the policy was sold to politicians and the military hierarchy and then implemented (see Rid 2007, pp. 129–143).
3. Back in Adelaide, John Brittle tried without success to convince his employers at the *Adelaide Advertiser* that he should be in Vietnam. They

- rebuffed his proposal because ‘they did not think it was worthwhile’ (Anderson and Trembath 2011, p. 231).
4. For a further explanation of the origins of this description of the Australian ‘policy’, see Anderson and Trembath (2011), p. 238.
 5. Troop numbers fluctuated slightly as personnel rotated. The figures quoted here are sometimes specific, and sometimes reflect the average over a particular period. These numbers fell gradually through 2013 until the final withdrawal of ADF forces in December 2013. That said, a little over 400 Australian military personnel remain in Afghanistan in training and support roles.
 6. At the height of its 2010 ‘surge’, the United States had 130,000 personnel in Afghanistan, well above its long-term average of 90,000. It too has now drawn down its forces to slightly more than 10,000. From a high point of more than 9500 troops, the last British forces withdrew from Afghanistan in October 2014. Comprehensive information on troop commitments can be found at ‘Troop Numbers and Contributions’.
 7. For more on this, see Mans et al. (2008, pp. 7–8).
 8. The ADF had a shifting force commitment that, from 2007 onwards, stabilised at around 1500 personnel. For more detail on Australia’s role in Afghanistan, see Smith (2010). Until they withdrew the bulk of their personnel in August 2010 and December 2011, the Dutch and the Canadians had, respectively, around 1600 and a little under 3000 troops in Afghanistan. For exact figures, see ‘Troop Numbers and Contributions’ (2015). For a more independent view, see Tanter (2010). For more information on the Dutch deployment, see ‘Missions Abroad’. Chris Masters notes the subtle differences of culture between the ADF and the Dutch military and their view of their roles in Afghanistan (2012, pp. 106–110). For detailed analyses of the Canadian deployment and the political manoeuvring leading up to it, see Piggott (2007) and Stein and Lang (2007).
 9. Author interview with Joop Veen, 21 June 2012.
 10. Author interview with Robin Middel, 23 September 2010.
 11. Author interview with Hans de Vreij, 22 September 2010. To put this in context, Kim Sengupta, Defence and Diplomatic correspondent for London’s *Independent* described the British process as a ‘bizarre Stalinist exercise which no one could quite understand’, while Thomas Harding of the *Daily Telegraph* observed that in the early days of the British commitment to Iraq and Afghanistan, ‘dealing with the MoD [Ministry of Defence], getting the embed itself’ was ‘more stressful than dealing with the Taliban or the Iraqi militia, more stressful than dealing with the army, more stressful than dealing with your news desk’ (Author interview with Kim Sengupta, 12 October 2010; Author interview with Thomas Harding, 11 October 2010).

12. Author interview with Robin Middel, 23 September 2010. The media did not recall these experiments quite so fondly. In a meeting with Middel, Peter ter Velde, defence correspondent for Dutch television broadcaster NOS, recalled that he and other journalists expressed their disapproval at the inclusion of entertainment reporters in the embedding scheme (Author interview with Peter ter Velde, 23 September 2010).
13. Author interview with Jaus Müller, 22 September 2010.
14. Author interview with ter Velde, 23 September 2010.
15. Author interview with de Vreij, 22 September 2010.
16. Author interview with Müller, 22 September 2010.
17. Some journalists noted the inconsistency of the policy in that while material produced in the field was subject to review, reports written on the aircraft on the way home, in other foreign bureaux, or back in the Netherlands, that might reveal more sensitive information, were not.
18. The final iteration of the CFMEP-JTFA dates from April 2010. It was available on the Canadian Department of National Defence website but, given the cessation of Canadian combat operations in Afghanistan, the link has since been disabled.
19. The original document was written by Don Roy, a strategic planner with military public affairs. For a history of its evolution, see Price (2009, pp. 37–43). The commitment of CF to Kabul in July 2003 put these reporting arrangements under some strain (see Price 2009, pp. 49–53).
20. This number was later reduced to 15.
21. In the first 10 weeks of 2007, the Dutch facilitated 370 external visitors to Afghanistan, a significant proportion of whom were reporters (see Mans 2008, pp. 25–26).
22. Author interview with Gloria Galloway, 18 October 2010.
23. Author interview with Galloway, 18 October 2010.
24. Author interview with Galloway, 18 October 2010.
25. Author interview with Stephen Thorne, 20 October 2010.
26. Author interview with Thorne, 20 October 2010.
27. Doctrine on *Information Activities* (ADDP 3.13) was first published in 2002, with a second edition in 2006, though neither was publicly available. The third edition of the doctrine, published in November 2013, was only made available to the public in April 2014 after a Freedom of Information request.
28. Author correspondence with Captain (now Major) Chris Linden of the Ministerial Support and Public Affairs Branch of the Department of Defence, 22 November 2010.
29. Author correspondence with Linden, 22 November 2010.
30. Author correspondence with Linden, 22 November 2010.
31. Thom Cookes of the ABC and Hugh Riminton of Network Ten spoke highly of the efforts of their PA escorts to facilitate access for them (see Logue 2013, pp. 53–55).

32. Ian McPhedran of News Limited laid out his discontents in the “‘Embedding’ Trial Report’ he wrote to the then-Chief of the Defence Force (CDF), Air Marshal Angus Houston, after his trial embed in August 2009. For a full transcript of the report see ‘Embedding in Afghanistan’ (2009, ep. 35). Notably, Sally Sara of the ABC, who was also part of the trial embed, has remained silent about her experiences.
33. Chris Masters enjoyed virtually unlimited, and mostly unsupervised, access to the troops when making his documentary for the ABC, *A Careful War* (2010), although this marked the exception rather than the rule.
34. Compare the experiences of Kathy McLeish, Chris Masters, and Thom Cookes. Masters notes that the PA officer who accompanied him on his 2010 trip to Afghanistan was known by the troops as the FONC—the ‘friend of no cunt’ (see Masters 2012, p. 219).
35. On his 2009 ‘sponsored visit’, Hyland noted that it was easier to talk to the troops once you had moved off base and beyond the wire. Masters noted the same phenomenon.
36. When Masters was filming his ABC documentary, *A Careful War*, he was free to talk to anybody who was prepared to be interviewed.
37. Author correspondence with Linden, 22 November 2010.
38. Tom Hyland did, Thom Cookes and Nick Butterly did not.
39. McPhedran describes them as ‘bus trips’ (2009, p. 71).
40. As of 1 June 2011, AusAid indicated that it had ‘provided equipment for the Trade Training School in Tarin Kowt and the Tarin Kowt Hospital’, yet there was still no indication that the hospital was staffed or operational (see ‘Australia’s Aid Program’).
41. The trial was contentious and resulted in a highly critical report by one of its participants, Ian McPhedran, to the CDF (see ‘Embedding in Afghanistan’ 2009, ep. 35) The first reporters to embed under the new program, Nick Butterly and Lee Griffith of the *West Australian*, visited Afghanistan in February/March 2010.
42. This, she noted, was the ‘sense among a number of my colleagues’.
43. For more detail on the methods and findings of Logue’s study see pp. 22–29.
44. Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicate that in the five years between 2006 and 2011 the newspaper industry shed almost 13% of its workforce. In June 2012, Fairfax Media, owners of *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* announced 1900 job losses, including 380 journalists. News Limited cut 500 editorial positions in 2012 (Trute 2012). The Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, the main trade union for media employees, estimated that over the winter of 2012, 1 in 7 journalism jobs disappeared (see ‘News Limited Redundancies Should Be the Last’ 2012).

45. Early in 2013, Crikey reported that *The Australian* was soon to close its London, Washington, and Tokyo bureaux, while Fairfax was also looking at closing its London bureau (it didn't), having mothballed its Kabul office (see Knott 2013).
46. They include Max Blenkin at AAP, Ian McPhedran at News Limited, David Wroe at Fairfax, Nick Butterly at *WA News*, and a few others.
47. Author telephone interview with Tom Hyland, 19 December 2012.
48. Nick Butterly notes that 'insurance is a killer for newspapers going to Afghanistan' (Logue 2013, p. 47).
49. Chris Masters recalled that while the ADF applied a maximum threat level to Afghanistan, thereby entitling its personnel to an extra \$141.36 per day, tax free, when he notified his superiors that he and his film crew would be travelling to Uruzgan to make a documentary 'the ABC asked that we take a reduced travel allowance, advancing the rationale that we would have no use for it' (2012, p. 219).
50. Masters regarded this situation as 'a scandal' (2011, p. 37).

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