
Between censorship and rude sensationalism –
Falkland and “the information war”

Philosophische Fakultät

Universität Mannheim

Seminar: “Chronicles of conflict”

WS 2002/2003

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Abbreviations

MoD:

Ministry of defence

Jingoism:

Term for aggressive imperialism, which has a precise historical origin. “By jingo” had been in use since the 17th century as a phrase of emphasis (deriving from the conjuror’s “hey jingo”, akin to “hey presto”).

It happened to feature in the chorus of a musical hall song of 1878, supporting Disraeli’s controversial decision to send a British fleet into Turkish waters to deter Russian expansionism.

Supporters of Disraeli became known as jingoes, and their policy as jingoism.

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1. Introduction – the roots of the conflict

On Jan 3rd 1833 the Argentine flag, which was first raised on the Falkland Islands on Nov 6th 1820, was lowered by the crew of a British warship and replaced by the British flag. After the British took possession of the Falkland Isles they settled it with sheep breeders, 500 kilometres ahead of the Argentine coast. At that time the feud arose between Argentina and Britain. By 1982, the quarrel had been going on for decades and there had even been some shootings around the Islands.

Despite this and the warnings, which had been given weeks before the invasion, London did not see the event coming.

Three months before the war started, the Argentines had ordered all map material about the Falklands from London – and it was delivered promptly.

Ten days before the attack the *Times* reported, that British secret service agents had radioed the mission plans of the Argentine marine to London and that American espionage satellites had observed the preparations for the invasion and told them to London.

But the British Ministry of Defence ignored all the warnings.

And so in the early hours of Friday, April 2nd, the Argentine troops went ashore on the Falklands.

2. Censorship and the Ministry of Defence (MoD)

On April 3rd 1982, the first ships of the task force fleet, HMS Invincible and HMS Hermes, left Portsmouth with 14 reporters on board, including a BBC cameraman, a sound recordist and a photographer.

“The big ships sail to war”, reported the *Times* about the sailing of the biggest naval unit, which had ever left the naval port Portsmouth in peacetimes.

Four days later the troopship Canberra followed Invincible and Hermes with further thirteen reporters on board.

Before embarking, they all had promised “to submit for censorship all books, articles or other material concerning the task force during the period of operations.”¹

The reasons for this censorship were strictly military ones. The journalists were told that they could report everything else and that “there would be no way the material would be censored for things like style or taste”.¹

To ensure that every correspondent followed the rules, the military had five minders with the fleet. Their day to day task was to `take the reporters copy, check it to ensure that it did not breach any of the guidelines laid down by the Ministry, have it cleared by an officer on board ship and then arrange for its transmission back to London`.²

During the empty week before the task force entered into actual operations and reached Ascension Island, there had been a lot of quarrels between media, minders and Navy.

One great incident was that the reporters on board HMS Invincible and HMS Hermes were likely able to transmit their dispatches and photographs freely during their way towards the south. This was possible during the beginning though, but after three days out at sea, radio silence was imposed at them and so they could not transmit any information to London.

It remained possible to convey films or cassettes rather quickly by plane, but as the task force carried on its way from Ascension Island this solution became less and less satisfactory.

¹ Robert Harris, “Gotcha”; p. 26

² Robert Harris, “Gotcha”, p.28

On May 9th , the press sent a message underlining the urgent need of photographs and images of television, and asking that the films and cassettes of the reporters should be collected and checked more quickly, because at the time the material finally reached Britain it was often “deliberately delayed”.³

For nearly four weeks the Falkland battle had been a faraway, invisible war for the eyes of the Brits and the world, because when the material finally reached London, the Ministry of Defence kept all the photographs and films that showed the catastrophes - like the sinking of the HMS Sheffield – secret.

There already had been losses on the British side - the London censorship admitted them only with hesitation. After seven weeks, the MoD for the first time released photos of fighting soldiers to confirm the moral at home and as preparation for dramatic events.

On May 21st 1982, the British invasion fleet dropped the first raiding parties on Falkland and under fire of anti aircraft guns what most of the people never thought would happen: England really started to reconquer the Falkland Isles which had been occupied by the Argentines weeks ago.

Since then only fragmental details and more than once filtered dispatches from the reporters came through to London.

On the day, which the BBC later called “The day of the tragedy” two of the British landing crafts, Sir Tristram and Sir Galahad, were devastatingly stroke.

The extent of the catastrophe was first concealed by the MoD. For three days they refused to release the number of casualties. It was just said that the losses might be “considerable”⁴

On the day the Argentines surrendered, the journalists once again tried to transmit their dispatches to London, but there had been given instructions from London that no press were to be allowed to file copy. Frustrated and angry the war correspondents heard the news of “flying white flags over Port Stanley” announced over the World Service. Frustrated of not being able to do anything but hope to follow up with their own eyewitness accounts much later.

³ Robert Harris, “Gotcha”; p.61

⁴ Spiegel 14.Juni 82

From the beginning of the crisis till the end a really long list of grievances and a catalogue of complaints against the MoD had been accumulated and so four days before the end of the war, the House of Commons Defence Committee announced its intention of investigating the Ministries handling of the press and public information during the crisis.

3. War on Fleet Street - vivid sensationalism

In the 1950s the *Daily Mirror* had been the first paper, which perfected all the new techniques of popular journalism – the massive, sloganizing headlines, or the provocative comment – which the *Sun* employed during the Falkland crisis.

And it was the *Sun*, which appeared as the most patriotic one of all the Fleet Street papers. Although there had been violently patriotic papers in Britain before, this was the first time old – fashioned jingoism had been allied in wartime to a modern British tabloid.

The Falklands war had enabled Fleet Street to indulge in emotions and language, which had been denied in British newspapers for a generation.

Britain was in a bad mood after the invasion of “their” Isles and London’s newspapers reflected that mood in their headlines. The *Daily express* saw the Brits “under the thumb of foreigners”⁵ while the *Suns* headline was just “capitulation”⁵ and the *Guardian* wrote with self-irony: “British lion – killed with pants down!”⁵

A wave of jingoism swept over the British Isles and the newspapers demanded “the blood of the sinners”. The government now wanted to make reparations for the underhand attack by acting fast and energetic. And while Mrs. Thatcher summoned war council, the London newspapers at Fleet Street brought the nation into a pro war mood and the leader-writers put on all arguments needed for an action of the task force.

⁵ Der Spiegel



When the ships finally left Portsmouth the *Times* in the longest comment of the year with the headline “WE ARE ALL FALKLANDERS NOW” augmented “We are an Island race, and the focus of attack is one of our islands, inhabited by our islanders”.⁶ The papers were really enthusiastic at that time and had the headline: “WE`LL SMASH ‘EM!”⁷ And the paper sustained the same level of patriotic fervour for the next weeks.

For the *Sun* it was clear: “We had a black and white view of this war. It was us or the Argentineans. We had no dilemma about this.”⁸

⁶ The Times 5.April 1982

⁷ The Sun 6.April 1982

⁸ Robert Harris p.45

After some time, when the newspapers suffered from a shortage of “real” information from their correspondents, Fleet Street started to create a war with information that often bore little relation to the truth.

One example is the front page of the *Sun* on April 7, which was dominated by a picture of a jumbo jet with the headline “OFF TO WAR BY JUMBO!”

They reported that four British Airways jumbo jets were to fly 4000 troops to Ascension Island and “from there it is just a seven-hour flight to the occupied islands.”⁹

In reality, there never had been such a plan and besides it would have been physically impossible to use jumbo jets for such an operation.

Therefore there was a form of lying going on or it was more telling false facts or saying misleading things for devious purposes.

Max Hastings, a correspondent who was at the Falklands during the war said after his return: “I looked in the newspapers and was simply staggered to see what a load of complete misinformation was being transmitted.”¹⁰

Other tabloid journalists found the *Sun*’s coverage over the top.

Nevertheless Britain’s biggest selling tabloid went on with the provocative headlines.

They even created a daily series called “Argie – Bargie”¹¹ where readers could send jokes about Argentinians. The best jokes were published and the one who sent it in got 5 pounds “plus a can of Fray Bentos non Argentinian corn beef.”

The *Sun* made one mistake. In its patriotic and enthusiastic war recovery they did nothing to prepare its readers for setbacks. And when on Tuesday the 4 of May the Argentinians managed to destroy HMS Sheffield, it was a shock to the British. Peter Stephens, a former deputy editor of the *Sun*, even described it as: “it was as though we’d all been kicked in the stomach.” But instead of an appropriate reaction, the headline of the *Sun* to this event was: YET THIS TRAGEDY; SHOCKING AS IT IS, CAN IN NO WAY AFFECT BRITAIN’S RESOLVE”.¹²

⁹ Robert Harris p.47

¹⁰ Robert Harris

¹¹ Robert Harris p.46

¹² The Sun 4.May 1982

The *Daily Mirror* had a different opinion to this. They called the sinking “too High a Price”.¹³ And on 6 May they wrote: The killing has got to stop.” The *Guardian* supported this opinion.

Both papers caught the mood that now, after the Sheffield had sunk, the recovery of the Islands might not be worth the sacrifice.

For the ultra – patriotic *Sun* this combination of events was too much to handle. Their reaction was to turn on ‘enemies within’. “There are traitors in our midst”, they wrote in their editorial on 7 May.¹⁴

And they went even further: “ We are truly sorry for the *Daily Mirror’s* readers. They are buying a newspaper which again and again demonstrates it has no faith in its country and no respect for her people.”¹⁴

Many people thought that the *Sun* was pushing it too far. The *Mirror* reacted with illustrating an entire page showing *Sun* headlines and the following editorial:

“There have been lying newspapers before. But in the last month it has broken all records. [...] From behind the safety of its typewriters it has called for battle to commence to satisfy its bloodlust. The *Sun* today is to journalism what Dr Josef Goebbels was to truth. [...]”¹⁵

This resulted in the *Sun* identifying even more with the task force and from 11 May on every front page bore the slogan “THE PAPER THAT SUPPORTS OUR BOYS”.

The most famous headline in the whole war was to come off presses on the night of May 3rd 1982, after the Argentine cruiser, the General Belgrano, had sunk.

“GOTCHA!” was the first reaction of the *Sun* to this event, bearing witness to the newspapers initial “excitement and euphoria”.

After hearing reports of how many men had died the management decided to remake the front page – by that time 1,500,000 copies had already been on its way to parts of Britain – and printed a second edition with the subdued headline: “DID 1200 ARGIES DROWN?”¹⁶

As it turned out, “GOTCHA” epitomized and marked the high point of jingoism initiated by Fleet Street.

¹³ Daily Mirror 4 May 1982

¹⁴ Sun 7 May 1982

¹⁵ Daily Mirror 8 May 1982

¹⁶ Sun 3 May 1982

5. Conclusion

The Falklands war showed a new dimension in journalism: Though the journalist, hindered by censorship and technical constraints, could only provide very little information about the current events, the tabloids did not hesitate to create gloomy headlines. The conscious presentation of non-proved information is a significant measure for bad journalism. But still this was – in some papers - the most frequently used device. The rude and dramatic fight the *Sun* created over the issue of patriotism brought the public eye away from the fact, that there were not a lot of real facts to present. This event marks a very bad example in British war journalism which might have led to the stereotype of today's British press landscape: Numerous tabloids with no real content (alongside some serious ones).

The Falklands conflict may well prove the last war in which the armed forces are completely able to control the movements and communications of the journalists covering it. Technology has already overtaken the traditional concepts of war reporting and so information can be transmitted much faster today.

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