

## 20200614-Assignment Four a Picture Paints a Thousand Words

### Where the media reporting the truth to the British public or silenced by the Ministry of Defence (MoD)?

During 2009 – 2011 NATO's effort in Afghanistan was starting to be questioned, how the Afghan National Army (ANA) could sustain itself and continue the fight against the insurgent forces across Afghanistan without the support of NATO. This essay will discuss how the media can influence public opinions through news reports and images. Southern Helmand was making the news, daily with British Soldiers killed during combat operations.

News teams from across various networks would report both good and bad, giving conflicting views at various times of the campaign. It would prove difficult for NATO and the Afghan government under President Karzai (Hamid Karzai, 2020).

March 2010 a Channel 4 team led by reporter Alex Thompson accompanied Number One Company Coldstream Guards during an ongoing operation in Babaji (Being watched on the Afghan frontline - Channel 4 News, s.d.), north of the provisional capital Lashkar Gah to report on how the ANA were readying for operations. However, this would transpire differently during the two-day operation and news report.



*Figure 1 Alex Thompson and the Coldstream Guards 2010*

Phase one of the operation would be establishing the ground truth with the local populace and understanding the ground. The Channel 4 team would call this "Mapping the Human Terrain". However, it would be near an impossible task for NATO troops to map ungoverned areas.

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Soldiers in Fig 1 are explaining the process to Alex and the difficulties when presented with opium poppy or contraband. Numerous organisations within Helmand were trying to get local farmers to swap from poppy growing to other commercial crops such as corn. Growing poppy is very lucrative to them, and by taking that away, the family's incomes reduced. The opium poppy has a far greater financial reward than corn. The Afghan government was determined to destroy the opium trade as this funded much of the insurgent efforts. They were dividing the local population, adding to the confusion and pushing them towards the Taliban, thus gaining them more support. NATO troops started destroying the poppy crop, alienating themselves to the locals, who saw them as invaders with no understanding of their way of life. Many had never seen what is beyond the local village boundaries. Gaining the support of the locals was harder than expected. The language varies across the regions, where some interpreters will speak Dari and struggle with locals that speak Pashto in Helmand. Two different dialects create tensions that at times are not seen by the soldiers, other than the body language during heated discussions. Only then realising how hard and long this would continue for, yet the media will try to showcase this if it fits with the current lines taken by the MoD. See the video link.

What the media at times does not show and cannot due to operational security enforced by the MoD (OPSEC) is the grit, termination, self-sacrifice and professionalism our soldiers are showing daily in some of the most horrific conditions British soldiers have fought in since the First World War.



*Figure 2 Alex Thompson and cameraman and the Coldstream Guards*

18 to 20 years of age often their first time in an operational theatre, are walking into villages not knowing what the day would bring or whom they would meet nor what was waiting for them around the corner capturing it on camera to show family and friends later on return home. Soldiers have been renowned for years of recording

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their time during wars, through combat camera teams or people like Robert Capa, Don McCullin or just regular soldiers. Their pictures are the authentic images of war. The person behind the camera is taking the unaltered images of daily life on the frontline. Capturing the fear and unknown; through these images, we see how at times a boy or girl comes back a man or woman. So many have seen things that they will live with for the rest of their lives. Some may have lost friends or colleagues through injury or death. Nevertheless, their memories will forever live on through the pictures and videos they took during the tours of duty.

We would be regularly taking photos to establish who everyone was. Putting a name to a face would help during the weekly Shuras. We could interact with them building a strong rapport, never promising anything though. Just reinforcing that every time they would come, we would take time to speak to them and try to understand where we can assist.

The public does not see the interaction that soldiers are doing daily. Drinking chai and listening to stories of old. The local Afghans are incredibly proud people when talking of how life was, back before the Taliban were in force and well before the Russians invaded. The camera, at times, can be a battle-winning piece of equipment when we are trying to win over the population—showing a picture can, at times lower barriers that have been up for weeks in a matter of seconds. A picture does paint a thousand words, but it can start a new chapter where a thousand-words are speaking. Small wins are essential, something the media miss.



*Figure 3 Remembrance Parade Patrol Base Four Lt Douglas Dalzell bottom left (Killed in Action 18 February 2010)*

The Afghanistan war continues to this day, with NATO still at the heart of the battle supporting the ANA. Ten years ago, some would have said this would have been over by now. Fast forward two years to 2012 the third of four tours of duty were back again revisiting some of the same areas, seeing familiar faces. They do not forget who is who, where we tend to forget.

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At the start of this course, we looked at how photojournalism can direct the viewer and their opinions; it is true how images of war can provoke change when needed to support the lines taken by both the MoD and the Government. However, we will need to see both sides of the story to understand fully. In years to come, we may start to see more photos from the Afghanistan campaign turn up through articles, magazine reports or just by coincidence. Where these will tell a different story than had been reported during the evening news or newspapers, please do not believe everything seen in a picture until knowing the full history behind it. A picture will tell a thousand words. Fig 4 two of those soldiers would go on to win the Military Cross (MC) for his actions and one would be awarded a Mention in Despatches (MiD).



*Figure 4 MC & MiD awarded Soldiers November 11, 2009*

### Word count

1109

### Illustrations

Fig 1 Personal picture from Op HERRICK 11 Alex Thompson meets the Guards.  
Fig 2 Personal picture from Op HERRICK 11 Alex Thompson and cameraman.  
Fig 3 Personal picture from Op HERRICK 11 Coldstream Guards Lt Douglas Dalzell MC Posthumously, Remembrance day Patrol Base Four November 11, 2009.  
Fig 4 Military Cross (MC) and Mention in Despatches (MiD) soldiers awarded. November 11, 2009

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