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Throwing the Baby Out with the Bathwater: Canadian Forces News Media Relations and Operational Security

On March 24, 1999, Canadian CF-18 fighter jets from CFB Bagotville, Québec, dropped their first of 568 bombs on military targets in Kosovo and Serbia. Almost exactly twelve years later, Canadian CF-18s from Bagotville once again took to the skies over the northern coast of Libya as part of a US-led coalition to enforce a UN Security Council–endorsed no-fly zone over the troubled North African country. Two days after that, shortly after 1:00 p.m. on March 23, Major-General Tom Lawson, Canada's Assistant Chief of Air Staff, confirmed at a media briefing at National Defence headquarters in Ottawa that four Canadian CF-18s had dropped their first bombs on an ammunition depot near Misurata in north Libya. Canada's jets were once again officially at war in a distant land. Major-General Lawson's briefing to the media was quite detailed, and he produced stunning cockpit video of the air strikes. “What you see here on the screen behind me,” he said, “is what is seen by the pilot in his aircraft. The flashing crosshairs indicate where he has placed his laser indication. In a second, you’ll see the impact of his laser-guided bomb on the riveted bunkers carrying Libyan armed forces ammunition. Shortly after this, you’ll see a secondary explosion to the right side of your screen, indicating that there were weapons held there.” For the first time, Canada was involved in two simultaneous conflicts involving its army in Afghanistan and its navy...
and air force off the shores and over the skies of Libya. Quite predictably, when federal politicians rose to their feet in the House of Commons to speak about the Libyan mission, they made comparisons to the air force’s role in the 1991 Persian Gulf War and over Serbia and Kosovo.

Canadians know little of the jets’ missions during the Gulf War and even less about the 1999 Kosovo air war: this lack of knowledge resulted from a host of factors that saw the Canadian Forces effectively undermine the democratic role of the Canadian media and stifle coverage of Canada’s first protracted war efforts since the Korean War. The key restrictive element cited in 1999 and again in 2011 is “operational security.” At the time of this writing, the mission over Libya has ended, and it therefore offers an opportunity to make comparisons about the state of the Canadian media coverage of conflicts and the military’s management of the media over time. A brief review of the history will highlight how that management has evolved and how it is being implemented now.

THE 1991 PERSIAN GULF WAR

In the months before the war, the Canadian Forces viewed the impending conflict as an opportunity to build popular support for the military. Internal military documents, obtained using the Access to Information Act, show that the military anticipated “maximum disclosure of information consistent with maintaining the operational security of Canada’s forces and those of other allied nations participating in the Gulf operations.” In its “After Action Report” on its public affairs planning, the Canadian military stated that it knew the media would play an influential role in that communications strategy because they would be the key conveyors of information about, and interpreters of, the war’s events to the Canadian public.

The plan specified:

a. Within the scope of operational security, media will be accorded every possible assistance in the preparation and filing of their reports;

b. Censorship will not be invoked by DND or by CANFORCOMME. The imposition of censorship can only be derived from censorship policy of the Canadian government.
Therefore it is paramount that a good working relationship with the news media be established to ensure they understand the necessity to voluntarily comply with in-theatre security screening guidelines. Accordingly, media covering the roles, operations and activities of the Canadian Forces Middle East should be prepared to submit their copy for security screening only;

c. There will be no suggestion that media expunge critical commentary from their reports unless there is an impact on security of operations;

d. Before they are provided access to in-theatre operations, all media are to be provided unclassified briefings about Canadian Forces operations and activities in the Persian Gulf, security considerations and requirements, and what is expected of them while they are visiting CANFORME units;

e. Media embarked in HMC ships may use ships’ communications resources, when appropriate and available. The Canadian Forces will provide protective clothing and equipment to media representatives when they are embarked in HMC ships;

f. All interviews with news media representatives will be “on the record”;

g. Journalists will be requested to dateline their articles and reports generically, such as “… with the Canadian Forces in Bahrain/Qatar/Persian Gulf.” No specific locations will be used when filing stories;

h. Media representatives will be assisted by on-site public affairs officers;

i. Diplomatic clearances, visa and inoculations will be the responsibility of the media members; and,

j. Media who are not prepared to work within these guidelines will not be provided access to CANFORME operations, activities and units.4

Journalists had to accept those guidelines in order to be accredited. Despite the military’s claim that it wanted to be as transparent as possible, the
media howled over the restrictions placed on them, referring to them as “censorship guidelines.” For example, the Globe and Mail reported on January 19, 1991, that military censors aboard Canadian ships reviewed journalists’ stories to determine whether they jeopardized operational security using guidelines that mirrored US Defence Department guidelines on the prohibition of information that would reveal military operations’ details, size, location, or movement.5

In the Canadian Forces’ lessons-learned analysis of its media management, the authors of the report wrestled with the two conflicting imperatives of their practices: openness and candour versus operational security. The report recommended: “We should standardize with our allies who have had more operational experience than we have and adopt their more liberal release of info policies.”6

THE 1999 KOSOVO AIR WAR

Some eight years after the writing of the Persian Gulf “After Action Report,” the Canadian Forces, during the 1999 Kosovo air war, completely ignored its own recommendation to adopt more liberal release of operational information. University of Leeds scholar Philip M. Taylor noted in 1995 that, despite rapid advances in communications technologies, there remained two ways militaries can effectively censor the media during conflict. First, access to troops can be denied altogether, and second, military leaders can control messages about the conflicts by inserting themselves into the news-gathering process.7 Air wars, in particular, lend themselves to such censorship quite easily because it is impossible for journalists to accompany pilots on their combat missions. As a result, crews can only be interviewed before or after their missions, and journalists’ reports can be supplemented by cockpit footage of bombings.8 Taylor argued that such images could not convey the “sounds, sight, smell, touch and taste of the nasty, brutal business of people killing people” that would frighten, appall, and repel most people.

During the Kosovo air war, the Canadian Forces applied both censorship techniques. Members of the media who travelled to Aviano, Italy, to report on Canadian air force participation in NATO’s 78-day bombing campaign were confined to the US sectors of the Aviano air base. Completely denied access to Canadian crews, the media had to rely on the goodwill of Colonel Dwight
Davies, which was in short supply. Davies, who commanded Canada’s Task Force Aviano, had no time for members of the media who he thought belittled the efforts of his air crews by questioning their proficiency at hitting targets. He also believed, wrongly, that the Canadian pilots identified in news reports during the 1991 Gulf War had body bags thrown on their families’ lawns by protestors opposed to the war. As a result, he would not allow the few pilots who eventually did speak to reporters to identify themselves or discuss details of their missions.

The Canadian Forces in Ottawa staged daily briefings on the war, but those briefings contained very little specific information about operations and no accounts of mission successes or failures. During one of them, in the most high-profile interview of the campaign, journalists talked in a conference call to one unidentified Canadian CF-18 pilot in Aviano about his feelings about flying into combat for the first time, but raised little else. Effectively, all life was stripped out of the journalists’ few print or TV reports from Aviano. In Ottawa, the Department of National Defence invoked “operational security” time and again, sometimes ludicrously, as a reason for not releasing information. The June 1, 1999, briefing is one example. That day, a journalist tried to get a sense of what the Canadians were doing in the bombing campaign by asking about the number of bombs dropped. Chief of Joint Operations Brigadier-General David Jurkowski stonewalled on the grounds of security. Asked for the cost of the weapons dropped to date, Jurkowski replied: “That could lead one to think about the number of weapons and by way of policy and security, we don’t talk about the number of weapons employed.” The journalist pressed, wanting to know why the number of bombs was a security issue and arguing that Canadians had a right to know the cash value of munitions dropped. Jurkowski responded: “I don’t have those numbers for you right now and for security reasons, I’m not going to address it any further.”

The journalist then dropped that line of questioning but picked it up the next day with Deputy Chief of Defence Staff Lieutenant-General Ray Henault. Henault went on the offensive in response: “We have been, I think, fairly open. In fact, very open throughout this whole process now at seventy-one days of giving you briefings daily so I think our process has been very open and transparent, probably in a way unprecedented in the past.” Henault then contradicted Jurkowski’s decision that, for policy and security reasons, the bombs’ costs would not be revealed by saying that Operation Echo had cost
$20 million to date and about 45 percent of that was on bombs. The journalists did not question the apparent inconsistency—why that precise information was withheld for security reasons one day and was not a security threat the next.

In the end, a content analysis of the entire daily print and TV coverage of the 78-day war revealed that nearly 60 percent of the coverage had two sentences or less about the CF-18s’ involvement. Slightly more than 75 percent had six sentences or less. Not much can be learned about the activities of air crew in a war in six sentences or less.

As a result, the Canadian public knows nothing about Canada’s involvement in the Kosovo air war. They don’t know that within days of beginning the bombing campaign, the air force ran out of bombs and had to buy more from the Americans with government-issued credit cards. They don’t know that the Canadian CF-18s’ highly touted four-power magnification NITE Hawk B targeting pods were old school and paled in comparison to modern GPS equipment. They don’t know that the pilots fought most of their missions at night without night-vision goggles and had to develop special flying formations to avoid crashing into each other. Canadians don’t know that the CF-18s had old radios and had them jammed by the Serbs with Celine Dion’s music. Canadians don’t know that the ground crews suffered terribly working in the heat and rain in improper clothing. Most of all, they don’t know about the effects of Canadian actions on the outcome of the war or even what kind of war it was. In short, Canadians deserve much better information about the courage of their military in the face of adversity.

AFGHANISTAN

Canadians have been deploying to Afghanistan since February 2002, and the Canadian Forces has studied media coverage and learned lessons about it—even if at times the lessons are ignored. Members of the Canadian Forces write about it in a scholarly fashion in refereed journals to diffuse the accumulated body of wisdom throughout the Forces’ command chain in order to better manage it. They work from a 123-page Public Affairs Handbook first published January 15, 1974, amended in September 1985, and amended again in March 1999 specifically to describe how to control all manner of messages and images that could affect how the Forces appear publicly, including
in the media. There is no equivalent document in Canadian newsrooms or journalism schools. The most comprehensive guide that journalists have for dealing with the Canadian Forces comprises five pages in *The Canadian Press Stylebook*. It sets out the proper way to refer to the Forces, where headquarters are, the proper way to use titles and ranks before a name, and how to refer to retired officers; it specifies that courts martial are open to the media and contains a section on ceremonies and miscellaneous details, including the fact that Canadians do not go to boot camp, but they take basic training.

The military’s studied approach to the media was on display in an article in the Fall/Winter 2004 issue of *Canadian Army Journal* by Major Jay Janzen, who examined the relationship between the media and the military during Rotation Zero (ROTO 0) of Operation Athena in the summer of 2003, when Canadian journalists were embedded with the Third Battalion of the Royal Canadian Regiment (3 RCR) based in Kabul, Afghanistan. That relationship came from a ground rules agreement, borrowed from the American experience in Iraq to manage the journalists hosted by the 3 RCR. The Canadian military quickly learned that there were big differences between the American concept of embedding in Iraq and the Canadians’ Afghanistan experience. In the Iraq war, for example, individual journalists were assigned to specific units for the duration—eating, sleeping, and travelling with the same unit for weeks or even months, and receiving briefings from platoon or company commanders with scant public affairs experience. As a result, they had little contact with public affairs officers or senior commanders, and the military lost its ability to influence the journalists from a strategic perspective.

The Canadian journalists, meanwhile, were based at Camp Julien in separate living quarters from the troops. There were eight of them from five different media organizations, and they were in regular contact with public affairs and senior officers, who learned, as an effective media relations tactic, that by informally engaging the journalists, they could often influence what they covered. Major Janzen explained:

> On many occasions, senior officers would join members of the media for meals or a cup of coffee. These impromptu gatherings suggested to journalists that they were not regarded as an inconvenience or something to be avoided. Further, it gave both parties an opportunity to hold informal discussions that would often lead to positive story ideas being passed to journalists. Many
company commanders also sought out journalists when their troops were about to embark on interesting or important missions. Reporters appreciated being given information on upcoming activities rather than having to discover it on their own. By pushing information to the media, the battalion was also able to exercise some influence over what journalists decided to cover. When an opportunity to cover a mission or event was proactively presented to a reporter, it almost always received coverage.22

Major Janzen wrote that the military would prefer to have journalists remain in theatre for extended periods because interactions with them tended to be more cordial than with those who remained for only short periods or who chose not to be embedded. Those non-embedded journalists, called “unilaterals,” who did not sign the embedding agreement sometimes just came and went, or lived off-camp. It was much more beneficial for the military to have embedded journalists with the Canadian troops rather than journalists reporting as unilateralists.23

The single biggest problem Major Janzen documented was disputes over access to information that the Forces refused to provide for reasons of operational security. Major Janzen notes that media members were routinely briefed on impending operations and provided with sensitive material to help them understand and report to Canadians about the overall Canadian mission in Kabul, but they weren’t allowed to file reports until authorized to do so by unit commanders.

Embedded journalists signed a ground rules agreement far more restrictive than the ground rules agreement for the 1991 Persian Gulf War, which the media at the time claimed was censorship. While the later agreement didn’t require media covering the roles, operations, and activities of the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan to submit their copy for security screening, as did the 1991 agreement, it detailed nineteen categories of information that could not be released unless specifically approved by the Task Force Commander and only ten categories that could. For reasons that appeared eminently reasonable, the information that could not be reported included such categories as “specific information on troop strength, equipment or critical supplies (e.g. artillery, radars, trucks water, etc.)” and “information on future operations, current operations, postponed or cancelled operations.”24 Among those that could be reported were the “arrival of military units in the area when officially
announced,” “non-sensitive, unclassified information regarding air and ground operations, past and present,” and, laughably, “weather and climate conditions.” These detailed restrictions were imposed even though not one responsible journalist—or news organization, for that matter—would report on future operations.

Many journalists became impatient when, for example, during rocket attacks against Camp Julien, they could only leave their assigned protected areas seeking imagery, sounds, and impressions of the event under the escort of a public affairs officer. The problem with that approach, Major Janzen noted, was that Canadians reading or watching the news at home “can be left with impression the Canadian Forces are involved in a soft peacekeeping mission, when in fact troops are being deployed on some dangerous and sensitive missions.” The challenge, he wrote, was to strike a balance so the media could report on aspects of the missions while maintaining elevated levels of operational security.

The point is that Canadian journalists do not approach the Canadian Forces in the studied fashion that the military approaches them. There are no peer-reviewed journals to which they contributed reflections on their successes or failures as an industry in their coverage of the 1991 Persian Gulf War or the 1999 Kosovo air war.

Sharon Hobson, the Canadian correspondent for Jane’s and a research fellow of the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute, authored a paper for CDFAI that took an in-depth look at operations security (a term used interchangeably with operational security) as applied in Afghanistan. She examined the coverage of Afghan detainees and Canadian Special Forces operations and determined that one could learn very little from media reports about Afghan detainees and nothing at all about the Special Forces who have been in Afghanistan continuously since 2001. She argues: “The use of OPSEC [operations security] to deny information to the public is often understandable and justifiable when the CF deploys on a combat mission. But if it is to be acceptable, it must be applied with surgical precision, to specific events, materiel, or personnel. To apply the broad brush of OPSEC to deny information as a matter of convenience, without explanation or with false explanations, undermines the military’s credibility not only on the operation in question but in all areas.”

Threading the Baby Out with the Bathwater
An example of what Hobson meant was the February 2008 media briefing provided by Brigadier-General Peter Atkinson, director of General Operations with the Strategic Joint Staff, in which he talked about operations security. It shows exactly how far operational security has evolved since it was first institutionalized in the 1991 ground rules agreement. He acknowledged the media’s requirement for information but pointed out the problems associated with providing it:

Simply put, OPSEC is keeping the good guys’ secrets from the bad guys. We firmly believe that Canadians have the right to know about our operations in Afghanistan. We also understand the importance of independent reporting and analysis of the government of Canada in this complex environment. Your appetite for information serves positive and lawful objectives of our Canadian democracy. OPSEC allows the safeguarding of some information that has an operational impact on our mission while permitting Canadians to know as much as possible about their soldiers and members of the whole government team.…

Simply, the smallest piece of information may be invaluable in the hands of personnel employed in the counter-intelligence world, given the fact that they have access to a much broader spectrum of information. In the hands of a journalist, unrelated pieces of information can be turned into an excellent story.

The same is true for sensitive information, which may not in and of themselves be sensitive but formed together they create a comprehensive picture of significant use to our adversaries.…

To close, here is an excerpt from an Al-Qaeda training manual with respect to their use of information sources. They identify that an organization must gather as much information as possible about the enemy, in other words about us. Information in their words has two sources:

Public sources. Using this public source openly and without resorting to illegal means it is possible to gather at least 80% of the information about the enemy.

Now secret sources. It is possible through these secret and dangerous methods to obtain 20% of the information that is considered secret.
So we need to make their collection efforts as difficult as possible, by denying them 80% of the solution. This will make it difficult for groups like Al-Qaeda to plan their operations.28

Using a baby-and-the-bath-water analogy, if the baby is 20 percent of information that is considered secret and the water is 80 percent of the information that is available publicly, Brigadier-General Atkinson proposes a 100 percent solution that would throw the baby out with the bath water. In his application of operational security, the Canadian media would have absolutely no understanding of or knowledge about what the Canadian Forces do on the ground.

LIBYA

Much like during the Kosovo air war, daily press conferences on the Libya conflict began at National Defence headquarters on March 21, 2011, the first day of Canadian operations. The previous week, the air force had been tasked with contributing to the UN Security Council–backed no-fly zone over Libya. In-theatre operations comprises two task forces. Task Force Charlottetown consists of about 250 personnel aboard the frigate HMCS Charlottetown, contributing to a multinational flotilla of sixteen ships escorting and providing air defence for more vulnerable vessels. Task Force Libecco consists of some 265 personnel, the seven CF-18 Hornet jet fighters, two CC-150 Polaris in-flight refuellers, and two CP-140 Aurora maritime patrol aircraft. The planes fly from Italy’s Trapani-Birgi Airbase in Sicily, while the task force headquarters is in Poggio Renatico, about thirty kilometres northeast of Bologna.29

Canadian CF-18 operations began on March 21, and later that day, politician after politician rose in the House of Commons hours after the press briefing to speak to a motion supporting the mission presented by Defence Minister Peter MacKay. None of them referred to the Canadian military action as an act of war. The key words in the motion were the following: “The government shall work with our allies, partners and the United Nations to promote and support all aspects of UNSC Resolution 1973, which includes the taking of all necessary measures to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in Libya and to enforce the no-fly zone, including
the use of the Canadian Forces and military assets in accordance with UNSC Resolution 1973.” In the same way in which the politicians had dodged the question of whether Canada was at war during the 1999 Kosovo air war, no Canadian political leader used the word “war” in 2011. In Kosovo, Canadian pilots dropped 568 bombs, some 500,000 pounds of high explosive, but it was not a war. “All necessary measures including the use of military assets,” it seems, has become the euphemism for war.

Two prominent Canadian journalists, Rosie DiManno of the Toronto Star and Eric Reguly of the Globe and Mail, travelled to the Trapani-Birgi Airbase in Sicily to talk to Canadian fighter pilots. They were each only allowed to interview Lieutenant-Colonel Syvlain Ménard, commander of the 425th Tactical Fighter Squadron. Reguly arrived first. He reported on the importance the pilots place on hitting their targets with pinpoint accuracy, but also avoiding civilian casualties—even if that meant returning home without dropping bombs. He noted that the pilots are often provided with their target information while they are en route to the no-fly zone. He also reported that only one of the twelve pilots based in Sicily had flown in combat missions over Serbia and Kosovo. Sadly, Reguly was not allowed to talk to any of them. There was no explanation why.

Five days later, DiManno published a story also quoting Colonel Ménard on the importance of the pilots not dropping their bombs if they think they can’t do so without killing civilians. That made the mission particularly difficult when Colonel Gadhafi’s troops routinely placed their weapons near civilians, effectively making them human shields. She also went into some detail about the amount of flying required—that a mission can begin around 8:40 a.m. and return to the tarmac at 1:32 p.m, and that the pilots are routinely provided with their target information en route to the no-fly zone. Colonel Ménard was also the only pilot she interviewed.

Why was Colonel Ménard the only one who talked to Reguly and DiManno? Were there operational security concerns, and if so, what were they? Were they the same as those of the Canadian commander in Aviano more than a decade earlier—that families in Canada would be threatened if pilots were identified in the news media? Those questions were put to Major Leah Byrne in Poggio Renatico. She replied:
The concern is that not everyone is in favour of this air campaign and what we are doing. Until a thorough threat analysis could be completed it was determined that only the detachment commander would speak to the media. Due to their positions they have an added level of responsibility and with this comes any additional risk that might (or might not) be associated with having their name in public. As you can appreciate this campaign started with very little notice, and so in due time we will be able to determine if a more liberal approach is warranted. We know there is a demand from the media to talk to pilots and so we have adopted this approach until it can be further reviewed.32

No one in Ottawa mentioned the need to conduct a threat assessment in the interest of operational security. The argument that not everyone is in favour of the war and there is a need for a threat assessment, however, has the potential to be even more draconian than the previously advanced “mosaic” argument that even small amounts of information could reveal much about the larger picture. It is unlikely that those who are opposed to the bombing will have an epiphany and suddenly support it. That means a thorough threat analysis could last until the last bomb is dropped and the last airplane returned to Canada. The result is that the restrictions placed on journalists could last that long or even longer, and, just as in the Kosovo air war, very few Canadians will have a current understanding of what their airmen and women are doing in battle.

It is also ironic that the Canadian commander of the NATO bombing campaign, Lieutenant-General Charles Bouchard, told the media at Allied Joint Forces Command in Naples, “It’s not about me, it’s about the whole gang here that NATO was able to so quickly put it together.”33 In an interview, the general was candid about his role directing the war and the pressures he faced to minimize civilian casualties, but he was disingenuous in stating that it is not about him and a handful of others who have been named in relation to the war. In fact, the coverage is about him rather than his troops since through the constraints placed on the media, their coverage has made him and his commanders the faces of the war, not the hundreds of Canadians actually fighting and supporting it.

It is just as Philip Taylor highlighted: access to troops can be denied altogether and military leaders can control messages about the conflicts by
inserting themselves into the news-gathering process. An example appeared in the *Globe and Mail* after reporter Paul Koring flew on a Canadian Hercules mid-air refuelling mission. He quoted a pilot’s joke that bomb-laden Italian Tornados arrive early for fuel but said he could not name the pilot; he did not, however, include why he was prevented from doing that. The Canadian Forces–supplied picture showed the backs of two pilots’ heads. Surprisingly, Koring did identify a Captain Andre Kratochvil, who commanded the ground crew keeping the Hercules flying, although the captain didn’t say more than one sentence about what they were doing: “You name it, we fly it, trash hauling [airlifting of supplies], refuelling, northern resupply, medevac.” That story of flying skill under less than ideal conditions was interesting but is just the tip of the iceberg of what could be reported about the bombing campaign without some of the needless restrictions imposed by the Canadian Forces.

**Conclusions**

Much has changed since two *Calgary Herald* journalists took portable computers and one of the first digital cameras to cover the Canadian Forces in Croatia and Bosnia in the war-torn former Yugoslavia in 1994 and transmitted stories and digital pictures to Canada via satellites from a war zone. Email was then in its infancy.

Journalists, some of whom work for multi-billion news organizations, now have cell phones, Blackberrys and iPhones, voicemail, email, text messaging, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, satellite phones, and portable satellite dishes that can keep them in instant touch with their newsrooms and people all around the world. The media’s modern technology can also connect soldiers, sailors, and airmen and women with Canadians at home to tell their stories in ways that were unthinkable even in Croatia and Bosnia in 1994. The live coverage of the invasion of Iraq and the war in Afghanistan are prime examples. Canadians are more connected, but are they more and better informed about the Canadian Forces in conflict in the new millennium? Sadly, the answer is no. The operational security restrictions developed in 1991 to manage the Canadian news media during the first Gulf War have been refined and codified to the point where, according to some members of the Canadian military, enemies can gather valuable battlefield advantages by building intelligence pictures in a mosaic-like fashion, similar to how a journalist begins with one nugget of information and uses it to build a
coherent story. That possibility, they argue, necessitates the denial of all information, even if 80 percent of it is available publicly.

As that spectre unfolds, others talk about the need for threat assessments, which do the same thing: deny journalists the information that they want and that Canadians need until the threat picture is understood in its entirety. If one operational security concern is no longer valid, a new one rises like a phoenix to replace it. The central issue is that the principle of operational security—or not jeopardizing a mission or troops—is so broad that there is no one single definition or standard for its application. That is apparent from the last category of information that can’t be released under the Canadian embedding agreement for Afghanistan. Added to an alphabetical catalogue of specific information that can’t be released is “any other information” that the commander of Joint Task Force Afghanistan orders restricted for operational reasons. That gives absolute power to the field commander to censor what Canadians can or can’t learn about Afghanistan. Who or what is the driving force behind withholding information about equipment, training, mission preparedness, or other information that would allow an assessment of what is or is not being accomplished? Is it the chief of defence staff, who may want to avoid questions that might embarrass the Defence minister? Is it the Defence minister himself, or the Privy Council Office? I can find no smoking gun that points anywhere but to the military public affairs officials who wrote operational security into their public affairs plans. After that, the gun points to individual spokespeople in Ottawa and field commanders, who have wide latitude to decide what the news media can and cannot know and report.

Censorship has been officially invoked by the Canadian government only during the First and Second World Wars. Now, with “operational security,” there is no need for official censorship. This didn’t start with the war in Libya; it started in the 1991 Persian Gulf War and followed through to the role of Canadian troops in the battle of the Medak Pocket in Croatia in 1993, to the 1999 Kosovo air war, to Afghanistan, and to Libya. The implications for Canadian democracy are profound. Canadians will not be able to make timely and informed judgements about the military’s performance and actions, and the government’s ability to oversee the military’s conduct of war. That is not how democracies are supposed to work and not how militaries are supposed to behave. It does, though, give credence to the old adage that militaries defend democracy, but they don’t always practice it.
That is one half of the concern. The other is that there are less than a dozen journalists in Canada who specialize in covering the Canadian Forces. Only a handful—like Graeme Smith, Matthew Fisher, Murray Brewster, Louie Palu, Francis Silvaggio, Bill Graveland, and Adam Day—have returned to Afghanistan six times or more. They have the opportunity to see the evolution of Canadian operations in the Kandahar region, unlike the vast majority of Canadian journalists who embed with the Forces there for six weeks and never return or cover the military again. Only this select few have the opportunity to see for themselves how the mission has changed and to assess its successes or failures. It is to that handful’s great credit that they have been able to accomplish much of that and, as a result, deserve their rightful place in Canadian journalism history. No one can or should compel a journalist to risk his or her life to go to places like Afghanistan to cover wars. The tragic death of the Calgary Herald’s health care reporter, Michelle Lang, in Afghanistan on December 30, 2009, underscores the risks involved. The ones who do go, go voluntarily, but there aren’t enough of them to do the job as well as the Canadian news media ought to during troubled times.

The Canadian combat mission in Afghanistan ended in the summer of 2011, and later that fall, The Savage War, a book on the combat mission in Afghanistan and the Ottawa backroom politics written by the Canadian Press’s defence correspondent, Murray Brewster, was published. What comes screaming off its pages is the unstated message that it is virtually impossible for even the most dedicated readers and viewers to entirely understand a complex mission like Afghanistan by reading daily snippets about it in newspapers or watching TV. The war only becomes somewhat comprehensible when someone like Brewster compiles as much of his knowledge about it as possible in one place. Having said that, until books like Brewster’s are written, the media is the only way possible for most Canadians to learn about wars in distant lands. It should be noted that Brewster’s book focuses mostly on infantry operations and uses the word tanks only twice. The fact of the matter is that the Lord Strathcona’s Horse (Royal Canadians) had rotated a squadron of tanks into Afghanistan continuously since the fall of 2006 with virtually no media coverage. Brewster also delves into his journalistic relationships with the Forces and politicians. Obviously, it is easier to cover an army or a navy than it is to cover a tank squadron because a tank has no room for passengers.
Similarly, journalists can’t travel with pilots to see what they do. They can only watch on the ground as warplanes thunder into the skies and listen to the stories that emerge after the fact, if someone will talk.

Following the death of Libya’s dictator Colonel Moammar Gadhafi on October 20, 2011, the Canadian government announced that its CF-18s would be returned to Canada by late October or early November. At the bombing campaign’s conclusion, only Canadian Lieutenant-General Charles Bouchard, who commanded the NATO operations, spoke to the media, and even then, he only talked about the importance of avoiding civilian casualties. Sadly, it will probably be historians, not journalists, who will have to tell Canadians the whole stories of the Afghanistan and Libyan campaigns. That, in turn, and despite the best efforts of a courageous handful, speaks volumes about the gulf that still separates the Canadian military and the Canadian media in the fulfillment of their social and democratic responsibilities.

NOTES

1 Department of National Defence Canada, news conference transcript, March 23, 2011. Obtained from Media Q Inc, for a fee.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid. CANFORCOMME stands for Canadian Forces Commander, Middle East, and CANFORME for Canadian Forces Middle East.
8 Taylor, “War and the Media.”
9 Bergen, “Balkan Rats and Balkan Bats,” 342.
10 Ibid., 285.
11 Ibid., 343.
12 Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff Canada, news conference transcript of briefing, June 1, 1999. Obtained from the National Defence Public Affairs Office (Calgary).
13 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 For a full examination of Canadian Forces management of the Canadian news media coverage of the Kosovo air war and its results, see Bergen, “Balkan Rats and Balkan Bats,” 258–394.
17 Department of National Defence Canada, Public Affairs Handbook (Ottawa: Director General Public Affairs, 1999).
20 Ibid., 43–44.
21 Ibid., 44.
22 Ibid., 45.
23 Ibid., 47–48.
24 Assistant Deputy Minister (Public Affairs), J5PA Instruction 0301, Department of National Defence Canada, November 12, 2003.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Sharon Hobson, “Operations Security and the Public’s Need to Know” (Calgary: Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute, 2011), 15.
30 House of Commons of Canada, Debates, vol. 145, no. 145 (March 21, 2011), 9071
32 Major Leah Byrne, email message to author, May 19, 2011.
33 Paul Koring, “It’s a Knife-Fight in a Phone Booth: Canadian Directing the War in Libya Speaks,” Globe and Mail, June 13, 2011.