

Canadian military censorship hiding in plain sight

By Bob Bergen

The Canadian military's management and censorship of the news media in Afghanistan is the proverbial elephant in the room that few Canadians talk about, but should.

No where is the military's news management more apparent than in an article in the Summer Edition of the Canadian Military Journal entitled "Reporting Live From Kandahar" (available on line).

It demonstrates the highly-sophisticated degree to which Canadian Forces public affairs officers study the successes and failures of the Forces' news media embedding program in Afghanistan with the express purpose of better managing the war news in the future.

"Embedding" means that news media members are able to travel with and report on front line units – living, eating and sleeping with them – for extended periods of time.

In order to do that, they must sign a ground-rules agreement that restricts them from reporting 19 specific types of military information or any other information the Force Commander requires in the interest of "operational security."

"Operational security" is the principle of safeguarding the integrity of a military operation or activity and the safety of Canadian Forces members or other involved personnel.

The topic of the Military Journal article is the lessons learned by military public affairs officers in the first two weeks of the Kandahar region operations in late February regarding injuries and fatalities.

Quite appropriately, the Forces immediately shut down the media's communications when Canadian soldiers are killed or wounded until relatives are officially notified.

The concern for the media managers is "unilateral" journalists who haven't signed the embed agreement, who operate outside the military umbrella and who are armed with their own sophisticated communications equipment.

They can learn of such news independently, break the story, scoop the locked-up embeds, but unfortunately sometimes get it wrong.

It is a set of media management concerns which are really no more controversial than a local police force withholding the names of a deceased motor vehicle accident or shooting victims from the news media until next of kin are notified.

However, just one example of information that the embedded media must not report upon under any circumstances will illustrate the far reaching political and military issues involved.

Category six of the ground rules agreement which came into effect in March 2006 forbids the news media from reporting on Rules of Engagement or ROEs.

ROEs dictate when, where and how much force soldiers can bring force to bear on perceived or apparent enemies in a number of scenarios that can include, for example, pre-emptive self-defence.

Ostensibly, ROEs cannot be reported upon because enemies might learn of them from media reports in far away lands and adjust their tactics accordingly.

It is worth noting that Omar Samad, Afghanistan's Ambassador to Canada, recently wrote in FrontLine Defence magazine that in order for the public, policy analysts, media commentators and political decision makers to understand the Canadian mission in Afghanistan they deserve "the highest level of openness and transparency about strategy, rules, multilateral agreements and *rules of engagement* (my emphasis)..."

The Canadian rules of engagement are simply not open and transparent to the public.

The important censorship issue here is not whether insurgents in Afghanistan might be able to adjust their tactics as a result of what appeared in the news.

Rather, a recent Royal Canadian Armoured Corps Association digest of military news revealed that NATO commanders are unhappy with the more than 70 ROE restrictions imposed on them by politicians which determine how much danger troops can be exposed to, where troops may be used and how.

What and whose restrictions those are is not discussed, but it is known that German soldiers are only to be used around Kabul, setting up the argument that commanders could do more with available troops with less risk if they were not limited by ROEs designed to win political points at home.

Given that Canada moved out of Kabul in November last year and is sustaining growing numbers of fatalities in the most dangerous fighting in Afghanistan, that is no small political issue.

One can accept that, in war, there are going to be military matters that ought to be subject to discretion and secrecy.

Although there has been no war declaration, Prime Minister Stephen Harper has admitted Canada is now at war, but the military's media management and hidden-in-plain-sight censorship limits what Canadians can know about it.

In the end, there is an inherent clash of competing interests between a military at war and a free press which favors unfettered access to information.

Ordinary Canadians who pay for that war – with their taxes, their sons, their daughters, their husbands and their wives – are caught in the middle.

In the public interest, the boundaries of that information no-man's land ought to be constantly negotiated between the military and the news media industry.

Canadians need to fully understand and appreciate why we are at war and the challenges the military faces in combat in pursuit of the government's foreign policy objectives.

Democracy demands no less.

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