The Media at War, 2nd edition – publishers, Palgrave Macmillan. Reviewed by Thomas Spencer, UK Defence Forum Researcher.

“War sells,” or so it is said. In her book “the Media at War”, Susan Carruthers considers the media’s conduct during the recourse to, and waging of war.

Carruthers examines the media’s role as a watchdog institution of democracy, duty-bound to scrutinise political reasoning in war. Her rich exploration of past conflicts underlines the circumstances that confound this prescription:

The reader learns how organisations, including Hollywood, have straddled a self-conflicting role throughout 20th and 21st century conflicts. Expedient Institutions have attempted a balancing act between political scrutiny and government instruction. Notably, the author entitles her work ‘the media at war’ in view of this self-conflict.

As a preface, we are reminded of the terrible fascination that war seemingly draws. Mathew Brady’s photographic stills of the American Civil War and the spectators his collection drew serves as a striking example. This prologue rationalises the timeless allure of the battlefield whilst underlining how technological advances, stemming from military impetus, have marked succeeding conflicts.

Carruthers pulls no punches; she argues that the advent of television is misrepresented as ‘the

principal agent of America's defeat in Vietnam'. Readers inclined to disagree should, at the very least, be impressed by her detailed account of the war in later chapters. Nevertheless her prologue closes in recognition that Vietnam has exercised the minds of successive policy makers, who have since endeavoured to manage public perceptions, during the Falklands, Iraq and Afghanistan. This central argument is well developed in the unfolding narrative that examines 'opinion management' throughout a modern history of war.

A carefully considered overview of popular mobilisation and consent in war is well characterised through a common notion that links all case studies: inciting 'the necessity of hostilities' occasions state manipulation or the skewing of debate. For this Carruthers offers a range of insights from - the most extreme example - radio broadcasts that compelled mass mobilisation in the Rwandan genocide, to the surreptitious manner in which the Bush Administration traded its misinformation as a commodity to a select clique of journalists.

A panoramic view of conflict progresses through the subject of 'Total War' and a critique that draws distinctions in 'opinion management' between the First and Second World War. Detailed insights into the evolution of war journalism explain how an initially distrustful British state steadily realised the potential of propaganda. Something which Hitler remarked was "an inspired work of genius" that utterly demoralised Germany's WW1 effort. This sets the scene in explaining the Second World War and its subtext as an "Information War."

Carruthers make a compelling argument that, in the end, "a strategy of truth" prevailed in the USA and Britain, whilst Joseph Gobbels's propaganda swan song offered subliminal instruction in German cinema:

Public awareness, in Britain and the US, of partial state censorship, coupled with state tolerance of satire mocking the censors, underlined freedoms and so this 'liberal system's strengths'. Ever objective, a balanced debate rich with primary sources empowers readers to make their own judgement. Yet the idea that, the "Totality of war" paradoxically produced liberty as society pulled together, is convincingly conveyed.

Moving succinctly from Vietnam to the digital age, a progressive and cohesive narrative allows

the reader to ‘join up the thematic dots’ between the Falklands, the Gulf War, Somalia and Former Yugoslavia. A study of Iraq and Afghanistan is well oiled with satire – “Long War, Short attention Span” – and explores in depth how ‘opinion management’ has been fashioned by the digital age. This exploration makes way for a perfect epilogue on conflict.

A highly recommended read offering a great many insights and an enthralling historiography.

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