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Tom Clonan

Dublin Institute of Technology, tom.clonan@dit.ie

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Tom Clonan, PhD, is a lecturer in the School of Media, Dublin Institute of Technology, and a security analyst.

Censorship and Secrecy: the Political Economy of Communication and the Military

Tom Clonan

Research and reporting: military censorship

The political economy of communication encompasses a broad body of literature that explores linkages between mass communication media and power brokers or 'elites' at a societal level (Boyd-Barrett and Newbold, 1995; Chomsky, 1996; Downing et al., 1995; Golding and Murdock, 1996; Herman et al., 1998; Keeble, 2000; Kellner, 2001; Mc Chesney and Wood, 1998; Mosco, 1996; Schiller, 1992). The literature focuses on a number of key power brokers within society such as the legislature, judiciary and a wide variety of powerful state agencies, including the armed forces, that would seek in their interactions with media organisations to regulate, control and direct public communication. The literature equally identifies powerful business and corporate interests within the commercial sector as power brokers who through ownership, direct investment and the powerful influence accruing from advertising revenues condition 'compliant' print and electronic media that constantly re-state hegemonic views and positions. The study of how these power brokers interact is often referred to as political economy (Mosco, 1996). Boyd-Barrett (1995:186) defines the political economy of communication as follows:

The term 'political economy' in communication research has a broadly 'critical' signification, often associated with macro-questions of media ownership and control, interlocking directorships and other factors that bring together media industries with other media and with other industries and with political economic and social elites ... Secondly, political economy also has an interest 'in examining the social whole or the totality of social relations that constitute the economic, political, social and cultural fields'. Thirdly, it is committed to moral philosophy, having an interest in social values and moral principles.

The purpose of this article is to examine specifically the 'social whole or totality of social relations' that exists between communications researchers in the academic field along with communications practitioners in the journalistic field with the armed forces. In order to focus on these two particular stakeholder relationships, the author will reflect on two unique sets of experiences, initially as an academic researcher with the Irish military and subsequently as a journalist in practice with the US military. The article will demonstrate the explicit manner in which both the Irish and international military operate – consistent with critical aspects of the political economy of communication rationale – to control information flow and to seek to limit or restrict by way of censorship any messages that are perceived to be threatening to the vested interests of the powerful.

The communications researcher and the Irish military

In 1995, the author of this article, then a serving army officer in the Irish Permanent Defence Forces (PDF), completed an MA in Communications in Dublin City University

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(DCU). On completion of the MA, the author commenced researching a PhD into the 'Status and Roles Assigned Female Personnel in the Irish Defence Forces'. The PhD consisted of an exhaustive equality audit of the Defence Forces' internal communications environment, in terms of written policies or evolved 'de facto' standard operating procedures, as they applied to female soldiers.

In commencing this research, the author enjoyed privileged access to the research setting as an 'insider'. (For 'insider' research in secretive settings, see Van Maanen, 1982: 116; Renzetti and Lee, 1993: 5; Maykut and Morehouse, 1996: 70; Mitchell, 1993: 47). The Defence Forces, like most armies, comprise a workplace setting which is for the most part confined within a series of fortified premises throughout the state. Casual physical access to such a setting – let alone the privileged and prolonged access to documents and informants necessary for research – would be almost impossible for the 'traditional' model of PhD student. Such a student, normally a university 'outsider' with negotiated access to the setting via the organisational gatekeeper, would have severely limited access to informants and documents within a military setting.

Even as an insider (a commissioned officer at the rank of lieutenant) the author was still required to receive written permission from the general staff in order to conduct the doctoral research. The permission to conduct the research was granted to the author by his superiors on the 22nd July 1996. The letter of permission, referenced CC/A/CS3/8, contained a number of conditions for the conduct of the research. Specifically it stated,

I am directed to inform you that the Director of Training approves Lt. Clonan's request to produce a Doctoral Thesis on the subject outlined provided that,

- a. The work is not published
- b. The exercise is funded by himself
- c. Any time off necessary is sanctioned

The literature on research methodology is filled with references to powerful 'gatekeepers', such as the Director of Training, whose permission must be sought in order to enter the field (Jorgensen, 1989: 45-6; Renzetti and Lee, 1993: 27, 123-30; Smith and Kornblum, 1996: 22; Mitchell, 1993: 10; Van Mannen, 1982: 108-9). The literature on research methodology suggests that such gatekeepers may impose conditions or restrictions on researchers and may in certain circumstances go so far as to attempt to influence the outcomes of research. Bernard (1988: 161) warns of such preconditions. Renzetti and Lee (1993: 27) echo such warnings:

Powerful gatekeepers can impose restrictions on researchers in ways that constrain their capacity to produce or report on findings that threaten the interests of the powerful.

The precondition 'provided that ... the work is not published' had far reaching effects for the researcher. Whilst data gathering within the setting was made possible with the letter of permission, at a later point, when the doctoral research was to be presented for examination, the Registrar's office in DCU sought a legal opinion on the military authorities' precondition 'provided that ... the work is not published'. In 1998, DCU's solicitors had formed the view that to circulate the PhD to officers of the university for the purposes of examination would constitute a form of publication. The author was informed that he would have to return to the gatekeeper – the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces – and seek a clarification or a 'letter of comfort' giving DCU permission to examine the doctoral thesis and lodge it to the library.

The issue around publication of the dissertation was complicated by two further matters. The audit of policies, standard operating procedures and memoranda within the PDF as they applied to female personnel necessitated consultation with an archive of documents within the research setting that came under the scope of the Official Secrets

Act. Simply stated, all of the documentary data consulted or made available to the researcher were classified as 'Restricted', 'Confidential' or 'Secret'. In addition, as an unanticipated and unexpected outcome of the research process, the findings uncovered evidence of widespread sex-based discrimination and bullying against female personnel within the PDF.

Bearing these factors in mind, the data contained within the doctoral thesis fits the classic definition within the literature on research methodology as to what constitutes 'sensitive' research. Renzetti and Lee (1993:5) define such a subject as

A sensitive topic is one that potentially poses for those involved a substantial threat, the emergence of which renders problematic for the researcher and/or the researched the collection, holding and/or dissemination of research data.

The research material was certainly sensitive, as it was concerned with systematic barriers to paid employment in the public service for women wishing to join the Defence Forces along with the abuse of female employees within the PDF. The research material did not contain any information that compromised the operational or intelligence security of the Defence Forces. Despite this and given that the Official Secrets Act contains a clause allowing for the communication of 'restricted' information 'when it is his (sic) duty in the interests of the State to communicate it' (Section 4, Official Secrets Act, 1963) the researcher found himself in the invidious position of having to seek further clarification/permission in relation to the examination of his research from a potentially hostile employer – a personal and professional dilemma that, to my knowledge, no other researcher within DCU has had to face.

The personal and professional dilemmas for 'insider' researchers posed by the twin factors of secrecy and sensitivity are not dealt with in a comprehensive manner in mainstream literature on academic research methodology (see Miller, 1998). The researcher duly contacted the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces and received written permission from him on the 25th of June 1998 to 'Conduct Research and Produce PhD Thesis'. In this letter addressed to the Registrar of DCU and contained as an appendix within the PhD thesis, the then Chief of Staff states:

In June of 1996, Captain Clonan sought and received permission to produce a PhD thesis on female personnel within the PDF ... This is to confirm that the Defence Forces have no objections to the publication of the thesis for academic purposes. The thesis may be circulated to officers of the university and any internal examiners for the purposes of evaluation and examination. The thesis may also be held in the library of the university for reference purposes.

This allowed the PhD thesis to be examined. Finally, in November 2000, the PhD thesis was lodged to the library in DCU. Some of the findings of the thesis in relation to the bullying and sexual harassment of female personnel within the PDF found its way into the wider public domain in August 2001 when Ireland's largest circulation tabloid newspaper *The Sunday World* ran a story on the issue. This article was followed up by the remainder of the tabloid and broadsheet newspapers during the final weeks of August and received extensive print and electronic media coverage. The then Minister for Defence, at the author's behest, convened an independent enquiry into the author's research which reported in March, 2003. This independent 'Study Review Group' vindicated the researcher's findings in relation to the treatment of women personnel within the Defence Forces.

Despite the fact that the Chief of Staff gave permission for the PhD to be lodged to the library in DCU in 1998 and that since 2000 the research has been on the public record in an accessible academic repository, many of the serious issues raised by its findings, specifically with reference to sex-based discrimination within the PDF, have not yet been publicly aired. As of March 2006, over five years since the research was

published in DCU library, the PDF still had no explicit equality mission statement or comprehensive and well-publicised equality policies as would be advocated in the literature on equality matters and as would be understood by official bodies such as the Equality Authority in Ireland. In this regard, the Irish military authorities would also appear to be out of step with their counterparts in the British and US military.

Over a quarter of a century after women were permitted access to the organisation in 1980, the PDF at three per cent female strength has the one of the lowest female participation rates among the ranks of the European military. The average strength for female personnel among NATO armies is around 15 per cent. The US military comprises between 20 and 25 per cent female personnel.

The author would contend that the preconditions imposed by the military authorities have placed limitations on the widest possible dissemination of the findings of this research. This is a negative dynamic that is identified in both the current literature on research methodology and in the political economy of communication. In both canons, such a negative dynamic is hypothesised as being consistent with or contributing to the preservation of a given status quo – in this case perhaps for an all-male elite (the general staff) within a male-dominated organisation (the PDF).

The journalism practitioner and the US military – Guantanamo Bay

In addition to lecturing in the School of Media, Dublin Institute of Technology, the author is also a member of the National Union of Journalists and is a journalist in practice. Following retirement from the military and particularly following the 9/11 attacks in September 2001, the author has provided constant military and security analysis to both the print and electronic media in Ireland and Britain on a freelance basis. In September of 2005 this freelance arrangement was formalized in the print media context and the author became Security Analyst for *The Irish Times*.

In this capacity, the author applied to visit the US detention facility in Guantanamo Bay in order to report on and analyse conditions there. The US military authorities at the US Naval Station, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba responded positively to this request. As part of the US military's Southern Command (Southcom) area of responsibility, the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay comes under the command of the Joint Task Force Guantanamo (JTF-GTMO) and runs as a parallel operation and support to the US military operation in Afghanistan.

In a process similar to that undergone by journalists seeking to be 'embedded' with US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, JTF-GTMO required the author to undergo a comprehensive background professional and security screening prior to consenting to the visit. This screening included a formal request from the US military authorities for such details as Irish social security number, home and business address, press accreditation details, passport details and samples of previously published newspaper articles.

This pre-screening of the journalist, including as it does a request for previously published material, is suggestive of a pre-emptive effort on the part of the US military authorities to pre-censor potentially disruptive journalists or reportage. This would appear to be consistent with the highly selective exercise of control by powerful gatekeepers alluded to in the earlier part of this article – where access to sensitive information is often granted only when certain preconditions are met. In this instance, one of the preconditions sought by the 'powerful elite', in this case JTF-GTMO, appears to consist of an auditing of copy for evidence of compliance or otherwise with US foreign policy imperatives.

With the screening complete and the consent given in principle, the author had to satisfy the visa requirements for work in the United States. During the visa interview, the author was asked if he had ever participated in or witnessed a conflict. The author

was also asked to indicate if he had ever trained in the use of weapons or explosives or visited such countries as Syria or Lebanon – presumably territories listed as ‘rogue’ states by the US Department of Homeland Security. Having answered ‘yes’ to all of these questions in the spirit of full disclosure, the author was then understandably asked to explain where such expertise and exposure was acquired. My account of UN service as a commissioned officer in the PDF was sufficient to allay any suspicions on the part of the US embassy staff who were unfailingly courteous and helpful.

However, it did strike me that a history of such visits to ‘rogue’ states by other journalists – particularly those not ‘embedded’ with US forces – might in some way constitute a barrier, legitimate or otherwise, to entry into the United States. In this way, security screening, in unscrupulous hands, might be used to pre-emptively censor or deny entry to journalists perceived as ‘non-compliant’ or ‘off-message’.

With US visa and JTF-GTMO requirements satisfied, the author finally received an officially approved and stamped US Navy ‘Area Clearance Request’ form for Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. On arrival by air to Guantanamo Bay the author was only allowed to exit the plane on production of this form.

Having been granted permission to ‘dismount’ the aircraft by a number of heavily armed US troops at Guantanamo, the author was then asked to sign the ‘Ground Rules’ or JTF-GTMO’s ‘Media Policy at Naval Station, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba’. This comprehensive, five page document contained a litany of restrictions and pre-conditions on reporting which effectively limit the journalist’s ability to fully describe conditions at Guantanamo Bay.

The restrictions which are too numerous to fully explore here contain such blanket phrases as:

By signing this document, a National Media Representative (NMR) is agreeing to abide by the following conditions: a. To not publish, release, discuss or share information identified by JTF-Guantanamo personnel as being protected.

Other blanket provisions are included in the document such as ‘d.4. Embargoes may be imposed by the JTF-Public Affairs Officer when necessary to protect security’.

In addition to these embargoes and restrictions, JTF-GTMO also ensured that the author was accompanied at all times by a military Public Affairs Officer and a further Intelligence ‘Operations Security’ Officer, who was in civilian clothing and who was only referred to by forename. No other identifying information was supplied. At the end of the visit to the Camp Delta complex, the author also had to submit to a ‘security review panel’ which audited all still or video imagery taken during the visit and which was entitled to examine the author’s laptop or written notes taken during the period on Guantanamo Bay.

JTF-GTMO’s media policy document also points out that in addition to all of these restrictions, embargoes and scrutiny by Department of Defence officials, the journalist is liable to ‘criminal prosecution’ if in violation of the ‘ground rules’ or ‘instructions of the Public Affairs escort’.

In essence, the security pre-screening process, the JTF Media Policy document, the PAO and Operations Security escort along with the ‘security review panel’, individually and collectively comprise a system of censorship with which the journalist must comply in order to gain access to the story.

Despite the imposition of these restrictions, the author was given access to all five detention camps on Guantanamo including those containing ‘non-compliant’ and ‘high-risk’ categories of prisoners. The author was also given more or less complete access to all of the military personnel on the island and was allowed free rein in on-the-record interviews to discuss any aspect of the camp’s activities.

At the security review panel, no images, text or notes taken by the author were deleted, copied or censored by the US military authorities. Following the publication of the articles in *The Irish Times* in October and November of 2005 – which were explicitly critical of Camp Delta – the author received only positive feedback from JTF-GTMO and the US Embassy in Dublin. The nature of this off-the-record verbal feedback consisted of an acknowledgement of some of the ethical dilemmas posed by ‘war’ and an agreement that on some issues, the US Embassy would have to ‘agree to disagree’ with some points raised in the series of articles.

The author did feel however that the combined restrictions amounted to an explicit attempt on the part of the military authorities in their capacity as state-sponsored gatekeepers to impose restrictions on researchers/journalists in ways that constrain their capacity to produce or report on findings that threaten the interests of the powerful (see Renzetti and Lee, 1993: 27). In this case, the powerful elite in question consists of the Bush administration, JTF-GTMO’s political masters.

Conclusion

This article has sought to highlight the manner in which both the Irish and US military operate systems of censorship that act to control the range and content of information communicated by both academic researchers and professional journalists. It highlights the links between normative critical theory as articulated by the political economy approach to communication whereby ‘powerful elites’ within society would seek to control potentially disruptive information and messages in order to preserve hegemonic views or the status quo. It also highlights similar concerns raised in the literature on research methodology about powerful gatekeepers particularly where access is an issue and especially as it relates to sensitive issues in secretive environments – whether that is the abuse of female employees in the Irish military or the circumstances surrounding hundreds of detentions at the US Naval Base, Guantanamo Bay.

The challenge for both academic researchers and professional journalists alike as they interact with the military is to be aware of this dynamic and to evolve professional responses that in some way counteract the unequal power relationship imposed by censorship. This aspiration is one of the central tenets of the political economy approach to communication – whether it is in learned discourse as researchers or popular discourse as journalists.

According to Mc Chesney:

The political economy of communication ... can probably be distinguished from all other forms of communication research by its explicit commitment to participatory democracy. Research is driven by a central premise drawn directly from classical democratic political theory: the notion that democracy is predicated upon an informed participating citizenry and that a political culture typified by an informed citizenry can only be generated in the final analysis by a healthy and vibrant media system. Accordingly, the political economy of communication has a strongly normative critique of the ways in which state policies and the media ... serve this ‘democratic function’ (McChesney et al., 1998:8).

I would conclude therefore that both journalists and researchers alike should adopt a robust professional ideology in order to counter state-sponsored attempts to suppress unpalatable truths by the imposition of legally binding restrictions and impositions. In order to counter these impositions, the first requirement is for insight on the part of

researchers and journalists as to the motivation of powerful gatekeepers in this regard. The second requirement is perhaps for collective action and lobbying on the part of third level institutions on the one hand and professional journalistic associations on the other to counter the military's justification for unnecessary censorship systems – often put in place in the name of 'the security of the state'.

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