

War Correspondents

By [Tim Luckhurst](#)

Summary

At its outbreak, newspapers in the Allied and neutral democracies hoped to present vivid descriptions of the First World War. They were soon frustrated. Censorship obstructed the adventurous style of war reporting to which readers had grown accustomed. Belligerent governments wanted journalists to encourage enlistment and maintain home front morale. Many newspapers in Britain, France and America were content to behave as patriotic propagandists. All were constrained by rules and circumstances. War correspondents downplayed misery and extolled victory. Soldiers found their behavior hard to forgive. War reporting promoted the belief that newspapers could not be trusted to tell the truth.

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Introduction

It is widely held that war correspondents produced an over-optimistic depiction of trench warfare between 1914 and 1918 and that their work distorted civilian understanding of the conflict (among the proponents of this position are Christian Delporte, Martin Farrar, Niall Ferguson, Philip Knightley and Colin Lovelace). An alternative view, namely that correspondents depicted grim realities as accurately as possible within the formal and informal constraints under which they operated, has recently earned attention. [Stephen Badsey](#) argues that British war correspondents wrote “pen-portraits of the horrors of the trenches [that] were on occasion so vivid that [Field Marshall] Haig was moved to complain”.¹

British, French and American newspaper readers in 1914 expected war reporting to be exciting and revelatory. In the second half of the 19th century, technologies, including the electronic [telegraph](#) and [photography](#), had transformed the coverage of news. Readers had experienced the consequences in coverage of the Crimean War (1853-1856), American Civil War (1861-1865) and Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871). In these conflicts, professional correspondents travelling independently had eclipsed serving soldiers as sources of reporting from the front. Moreover, by the end of the 19th century, the work of pioneers such as [William Howard Russell \(1821-1907\)](#) of *The Times* and [Archibald Forbes \(1838-1900\)](#) of London's *Daily News* had generated a tradition of bold, adventurous [journalism](#) capable of attracting readers and, occasionally, speaking truth to power. The Japanese decision to ban American correspondents from the front during the [Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905](#) had done little to reduce expectations. The war correspondent was a glamorous figure until the First World War saw this model of heroic, independent reporting severely curtailed.

Between 1914 and 1918, war correspondents ceased to be autonomous observers of conflict and learned to work within a set of laws and conventions that encouraged them to write pro-war [propaganda](#). The British journalist [Sydney Moseley \(1888-1961\)](#) described it as a time when war correspondents' "wings were so clipped by the authorities and the censors that they seldom fluttered to the front line. And their most magnificent flights were flights of rhetoric or pure fancy".² [Philip Gibbs \(1877-1962\)](#) of the *Daily Chronicle* wrote after the war:

We identified ourselves absolutely with the Armies in the field. We wiped out of our minds all thought of personal scoops and all temptation to write one word which would make the task of officers and men more difficult or dangerous. There was no need of censorship of our despatches. We were our own censors.³

American reporter [Frederick Palmer \(1873-1958\)](#) observed: "There was not the freedom of the old days, but there can never be again, for the correspondent."⁴

This article outlines how war correspondents who were able to visit the front worked between 1914 and 1918. It explores their relationships with soldiers and their involvement with state [propaganda](#). It identifies the themes and topics they did report, those which they were prevented from covering, and those which they chose not to touch. It argues that few correspondents were willing to report anything which might damage their country's war effort and even correspondents from [neutral](#) countries lied by omission. Collectively, their work contributed to the creation, on the British, French and American home fronts, of a mythologised version of the war. And, although the First World War is often described as the first [total war](#), it was reported from an almost exclusively male perspective. The Americans

[Harriet Chalmers Adams \(1875-1937\)](#),⁵ who reported from the trenches for Harper's Magazine, and [Mary Roberts Rinehart \(1876-1958\)](#),⁶ who spent three months in 1915 in [Belgium](#) for the *Saturday Evening Post*, were immensely rare exceptions.

All correspondents were constrained by rules and circumstances. Some also felt powerful personal commitment to concepts of duty and obligation. This essay argues that these constraints combined to prevent correspondents fulfilling the duties ascribed to them by liberal press theory. It defines these duties as those enshrined in the liberal ideal of a free press that, in 1914, was advanced as a justification for the freedom to publish in all the countries under scrutiny here. In contemporary theory, these ideals are described in Michael Schudson's "Things News Can Do For Democracy".⁷ The article also tests correspondents' broader obligation to record a reliable first draft of history. It argues that the war correspondents of 1914-1918 failed to "provide fair and full information so citizens [could] make sound political choices".⁸ They did not investigate the way in which [governments](#) and military high commands used power.⁹ They provided little analysis through which citizens at home could properly comprehend the war.¹⁰ They did too little to promote empathy with those who fought at the front.¹¹ They did not record an accurate first draft.

August 1914

When war began in August 1914, governments and military commanders moved quickly to exclude reporters from the frontline. Field Marshall Lord [Horatio Herbert Kitchener \(1850-1916\)](#), appointed Britain's secretary of war on 5 August, immediately banned all correspondents from the area surrounding the [British Expeditionary Force](#). Three days later, newspaper editors received letters informing them of the creation of a press bureau that would supply them with official reports and censor correspondents' dispatches.¹² Through a voluntary agreement negotiated in 1912, [British newspapers](#) had already accepted voluntary self-censorship on security matters. The [Defence of the Realm Act](#) (DORA), passed on 8 August 1914, greatly increased the state's powers of restriction and control.¹³ [Winston Churchill \(1874-1965\)](#), Liberal First Lord of the Admiralty, expressed succinctly the [British government's](#) hostility to the idea that correspondents should report from the frontline. "The best place for correspondence about this war will be London", he advised anxious newspaper editors, adding that it should be "fought in a fog".¹⁴

From the very outset, [France](#) made equally stringent efforts to obstruct frontline reporting. French commanders believed journalists had contributed to France's defeat in the Franco-

Prussian War. They were determined not to let it happen again. The French war ministry established a bureau to censor military information on 3 August.¹⁵ Siege laws enacted in 1849 and 1878 were adapted to obstruct any reporting deemed detrimental to public order.¹⁶

From the first minutes of the war, [Germany](#) imposed rigid and efficient military censorship and allowed no newspaper correspondents to visit the front. The press law of 1874 gave the [government](#) power to suspend press freedom during war and the government did not hesitate to use it.¹⁷ The semi-official [Wolff Telegraph Bureau](#) was [German newspapers'](#) sole source of war news and it cleared every word with the government.¹⁸ News intended for civilian consumption was augmented by military spokesmen at press conferences conducted by staff officers. Serving soldiers working as officer correspondents supplied meticulously censored material from the frontlines.¹⁹

But despite these initiatives, [censorship](#) was not immediately effective. In the first weeks of fighting, a few intrepid correspondents were able to move freely and, by living as outlaws, to report without constraint. They produced some of the most memorable reportage of the First World War. Among these examples of journalism from 1914 are three reports, which depicted the real consequences of modern [warfare](#): the first British; the second French; and the third by a then neutral American correspondent.

At considerable personal risk, [Arthur Moore \(1880-1962\)](#) of *The Times* found and spoke to soldiers involved in the British Expeditionary Force's retreat from [Mons](#). His report, published on 30 August 1914, revealed shocking news: "Since Monday morning last the German advance has been one of almost incredible rapidity...The pursuit was immediate, relentless; unrelenting... regiments were grievously injured...Our losses are very great."²⁰

Three weeks later, [Albert Londres \(1884-1932\)](#) of the Parisian title *Le Matin*, a similarly intrepid correspondent, cycled into the northern French city of Reims under intense bombardment by German [artillery](#). Londres and a photographer, Moreau, witnessed the flight of the city's women and children. They saw the destruction of its ancient cathedral. Londres wrote:

A shell had just fallen on the cathedral square...A second shell fell thirty seconds later...It was just the beginning. The guns were being adjusted. This time they had her. We lost count of the blows. They rained down relentlessly.²¹

[Irvin S. Cobb \(1876-1944\)](#) of the *Saturday Evening Post*, a mass circulation weekly news magazine published in Indianapolis, got his first scoop of the war in [occupied Belgium](#).

Setting out from [Brussels](#) in search of fighting, Cobb found German officers sufficiently proud of their achievements to overlook their government's edict that no correspondents should accompany German forces. Cobb's hosts showed him the consequences of their assault on the Belgian fortress at Liege. His dispatch described the devastation inflicted by the assailants' heavy artillery.

Had I not already gathered some notion of the powers of destruction of those one-ton, four-foot long shells, I should have said that the spot where we halted had been battered and crashed at for hours. Now, though, I was prepared to believe the German Captain when he said that probably not more than five or six of the devil devices had struck this target.²²

German newspaper readers did not read such material. However, for readers in [America](#), [Britain](#) and France there were, in these early chaotic months of mobile warfare, several additional examples of resourceful eyewitness reporting that conveyed a sincere and accurate impression of the fighting and its consequences. Separated from their officers, retreating soldiers recounted their experiences and correspondents reported them faithfully. Civilian [refugees](#) shared their horrors, hopes and fears. Wandering on the fringes of the action and smuggling their stories back to Britain via couriers based in the port of Calais, British journalists including Phillip Gibbs of the *Daily Chronicle*, [William Beach Thomas \(1868-1957\)](#) of the *Daily Mail* and [Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett \(1881-1931\)](#) of the *Daily Telegraph* were able to find compelling and detailed human-interest stories. This they did at grave personal risk. The enemy was advancing and the frontlines were not yet stable. Correspondents caught in civilian clothes risked being shot as spies. Several were arrested on charges of [espionage](#). Moreover, despite the risks taken to obtain them, their stories were subject to censorship at home.²³ This, though, did not yet prevent accuracy. In late October, Philip Gibbs crossed back into Belgium from France and filed a series of compelling eyewitness reports about the fighting between Nieuport and Dixmude in West Flanders. These appeared under headlines such as "Under Fierce Gun Fire in Blazing Town" and "Vivid Story of the Battle of the Yser".²⁴ Ferguson notes that: "Even in late November 1914 *The Times* saw no reason to varnish the truth about what was happening at the front."²⁵ Now mobile warfare had given way to stagnation, and the elite British title's correspondent reported:

Trenches and always trenches, and within range of the concealed guns the supreme law... Day after day the butchery of the unknown by the unseen...War has become stupid... The strain on the infantry is tremendous, and it is endless...At the cost of thousands of lives a few hundred yards may be gained, but rarely indeed does the most brilliant attack produce anything...Fresh troops brought up under the cover of a tremendous artillery fire which opens

by surprise may effect a breach...But only with heavy loss can such an attack be carried through.²⁶

It was the type of candour the British and [French governments](#) believed they must suppress. Unrestricted, it might threaten the supply of young lives required to sustain warfare in the age of mechanized slaughter.

Stopping the Supply

Knightley notes that: “[B]y early 1915 the net to prevent war correspondents getting anywhere near the war was drawing tighter.”²⁷ Angered by reporting of the retreat from Mons and the [fighting on the river Marne](#), Lord Kitchener had already attempted to make war correspondents redundant by appointing a soldier to supply the newspapers. [Ernest Dunlop Swinton \(1868-1951\)](#) was a full colonel in the Royal Engineers. Working in France under the title “Eyewitness”, he produced dull, officially authorized copy packed with military terminology and devoid of the names of places, soldiers and regiments.²⁸ Swinton would later confirm that he wrote not as a journalist seeking to inform the public, but as a soldier determined to maintain home front support for the British army:

The principle which guided me in my work was above all to avoid helping the enemy. This appeared to me even more important than the purveyance of news to our own people...For home consumption...I essayed to tell as much of the truth as was compatible with safety, to guard against depression and pessimism, and to check unjustified optimism which might lead to a relaxation of effort.²⁹

Kitchener reinforced Swinton’s deployment by circulating to the British Expeditionary Force a list of the names of British correspondents still in France whose immediate arrest he sought. Philip Gibbs was arrested at Le Havre and warned that he would be shot if he returned to France.³⁰ Now France adopted still more repressive tactics towards its war correspondents. The French army was determined that the only supply of news from the front should come from its own *Service d’Information*. Tom Quinn notes that: “Journalists were not allowed to visit the front and civilian newspapers could not be distributed along it.”³¹

The American neutrals fared a little better. Several, including Irvin Cobb and [Richard Harding Davis \(1864-1916\)](#), doyen of the American war correspondents, chose to go home rather than submit to the indignities of censorship. Others stayed to take full advantage of their country’s neutral status. Among these, William G. Shepherd of the United Press was particularly successful. He broke exclusive stories including the first German use of [poison gas](#) on the

[Western Front](#) at [Ypres](#) in April 1915 and the first [Zeppelin](#) raid on [London](#) in September 1915. Knightley notes that Shepherd learned fast how best to squeeze his words past the censors.³² On the occasion of the gas attack, he did not need to squeeze: the British were delighted by the propaganda impact of his description of gas victims.

Exploitation for propaganda purposes of American war correspondents was a tactic employed on both sides of the Western Front. Their draconian press laws did not prevent the German military offering help and support to journalists whom they believed might help influence American domestic opinion in their favour. Britain and Germany had been major trading partners before 1914. Each felt the loss of such a convenient export market and sought to replace lost business with new, transatlantic trade.

Orchestrated Coverage

Early in 1915, the British and French governments confronted a dilemma. They had stopped free movement of correspondents on the Western Front and imposed effective censorship. However, in so doing they had angered Americans by restricting access to coverage of the fighting. In the first months of the war, American readers had grown accustomed to detailed, colorful and balanced reporting. Objectivity was already an established principle of American news reporting. Journalists and their employers cherished it as a way to distinguish their work from that of America's burgeoning public relations industry. In 1914, American correspondents had applied their principle to challenge reports of German [atrocities](#) in Belgium. Now the shortage of reporting about the British and French armies risked giving German propaganda undue prominence by default. In January 1915, the former American president, [Theodore Roosevelt \(1858-1919\)](#), wrote to Sir [Edward Grey \(1862-1933\)](#), Britain's foreign secretary, to warn him that the consequence of ejecting correspondents was that the only authentic war news reaching American readers was coming from the German side.

The French were first to devise a solution intended to satisfy domestic and overseas demand. In February 1915, they introduced a system of accredited correspondents.³³ In Britain, political pressure to end unnecessary secrecy soon mounted and was reinforced by vocal complaints from British newspapers. In May 1915, the British government decided to imitate the French model: a small group of accredited correspondents representing the British press would be allowed to report from the Western Front.³⁴ Like their French counterparts, these journalists would work under close and constant supervision by the military. It was the birth of a process by which blunt censorship would be replaced by a subtler system in which newspaper power was manipulated to serve government interests. Farrar notes that "most of the articles written by the accredited correspondents were recycled a few days later and

used in newspapers all around the Empire and the world”³⁵.

The correspondents who arrived at the British army’s General Headquarters at St Omer in June 1915 were: William Beach Thomas for the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Mirror*; [Basil Clarke \(1879-1947\)](#) for the Amalgamated Press; Philip Gibbs for the *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Chronicle*; [Percival Phillips \(1877-1937\)](#) for the *Daily Express*; [H. Perry Robinson \(1859-1930\)](#) for *The Times* and *Daily News*; and [Herbert Russell \(1869-1944\)](#) of the Reuters news agency. All billeted together in a house in the village of Tatinghem adjacent to St Omer, they were supplied with army servants, army vehicles and dedicated conducting officers. Censors accompanied them at all times. Crucially, they received officer’s uniforms bearing green armbands – normally the insignia of the intelligence services – and the honorary rank of captain. Formally, they were allowed to go wherever they liked and to report whatever took their interest, provided only that their work did not break the rules of censorship. In fact, they could go nowhere unless accompanied by their conducting officers and censors. Every word they wrote was read by these mobile censors who also checked to ensure that they were concealing no private messages by means of invisible ink. Once approved by the censors, their reports were taken to St Omer whence they were transmitted to the War Office by the army’s own signals department. The War Office forwarded the dispatches to the relevant newspapers and agencies. Following first publication in the UK, the Newspaper Proprietors’ Association then made them available for use by newspapers throughout the British Empire and beyond. The army had bowed reluctantly to political pressure to admit reporters. It had no intention of allowing them to write accurate first drafts of history, still less to hold power to account.

America entered the war in April 1917, mere months after President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#) had won re-election in a tight contest against his Republican opponent, [Charles E. Hughes \(1862-1948\)](#). While making plain his preparedness to lead America into war if he considered it necessary, Wilson’s campaign had appealed to voters who wanted to maintain American neutrality by reminding them that: “He kept us out of war.”³⁶ And, although sympathy with the Allies was now common, economic support for their cause was more popular than the commitment of American lives. This ambivalence was confirmed by poor responses to the government’s initial appeal to young men to volunteer for the armed forces. Wilson had a propaganda battle to fight. To win it he established and funded generously a Committee on Public Information. Its objective was to generate intense popular animosity towards Germany.³⁷

These efforts to sway American opinion created intense anti-German sentiment. Nevertheless, as Ferguson explains, the Wilson administration remained concerned about the

extent of patriotism in an American population of 100 million citizens, which included 8 million first or second generation Germans and 14.5 million Americans who had been born abroad. It updated America's sedition law to curtail criticism of the war. So strict was the new legislation that more than 2,500 Americans were prosecuted for sedition and nearly 100 served prison sentences of up to twenty years.³⁸ It was against this repressive backdrop that American war correspondents were sent to France.

Knightley explains that the conditions under which they worked were still more restrictive than those imposed on the British correspondents.³⁹ These included a personal appearance before the secretary of war at which the journalist was required to swear an oath of loyalty and obedience. His newspaper was required to pay a \$10,000 bond on the understanding that this would be forfeited if the correspondent broke the rules. Finally, lest a journalist should attempt to conceal his identity beneath a cloak of anonymity, American war correspondents were required to wear a green armband sporting a large, red "C".

Everybody Doing Gallant Deeds

Among the most alarming innovations in battlefield [technology](#) deployed during the First World War was the use of lethal gases including phosgene and chlorine.⁴⁰ Though these poisons caused a small minority of [casualties](#), soldiers found them terrifying.⁴¹ An example of the way in which gas attacks were reported serves to illustrate one of the important ways in which correspondents presented the fighting.

The Times of 26 April 1915 carried an eyewitness report describing the desperate efforts by British [infantry](#) to seize a tiny objective called "Hill 60", "only about 250 yards in length by 200 in depth", during the Second Battle of Ypres. This was the first occasion on which German forces fired chlorine gas. The *Times* correspondent wrote:

Onto that small area the enemy for hours on end hurled tons of metal and high explosive, and at times the hill top was wreathed in poisonous fumes. And yet our gallant infantry did not give way. They stood firm under a fire which swept away whole sections at a time, filled the trenches with dead bodies, and so cumbered the approaches to the front line that reinforcements could not reach it without having to climb over the prostrate forms of their fallen comrades.

Acknowledging that losses had been heavy, the correspondent concluded: "Nevertheless they have not depressed the men, who are all, including the wounded, extremely cheerful, for they know that the fight for Hill 60 has cost the Germans far more than it has us."⁴²

The formal demands of military censorship are instantly apparent. The correspondent did not identify regiments or soldiers. He gave no estimate of casualty figures. These rules obeyed, he acknowledged deaths and wounds, but offered no description of the effects on human bodies of the artillery shells, hand [grenades](#) and bullets with which Hill 60 was bombarded. He did not detail the effects of the “fumes” and “asphyxiating gases”. Instead, he identified excellent morale among those soldiers who had survived the battle and attributed to them uniform certainty that, provided only that the enemy had paid a higher price than “our” side, all had been gloriously worthwhile. He did not quote a single soldier. The words were his not theirs. He spoke on their behalf but without their consent. His work fulfilled the purposes to which Ernest Swinton, the army’s own propagandist, had committed himself. It told only as much of the truth as was compatible with the maintenance of support for war on the home front. It took great care to avoid provoking depression and pessimism. It was sufficiently honest about the death toll to limit optimism and maintain effort.

If the preparations to which they had submitted before departure had not driven the point home, correspondents accompanying the [American Expeditionary Forces](#) (AEF) soon learned the extent to which military censorship was designed to make their work operate as a propaganda tool. Some resented it intensely, not least because there was much to write about. Emmet Crozier describes how journalists visiting the training camps in which American soldiers prepared for their first forays to the front became aware of “a growing procession of funeral corteges”. They also observed the atrocious conditions in which the men were forced to live: “There was no way to keep warm, no way to dry their clothing, no extra clothing or dry underwear to change into. As the weather turned cold and rainy, pneumonia deaths were rising.”⁴³ [_](#)

With their work censored to prevent readers learning about such evidence of inadequate supplies and incompetent distribution, some of the more assertive American correspondents formed a protest group, the American War Publicity League in France. Through it, they petitioned General [John J. Pershing \(1860-1948\)](#) for better access to information and reduced censorship. The American Expeditionary Forces’ commander rejected their demands. Crozier notes that censorship was organized “in the narrow interest of the military clique rather than in the interest of the American people.”⁴⁴ [_](#) This approach would have significant consequences at the beginning of 1918 when soldiers of the AEF entered the fray as an autonomous force. Now the correspondents accompanying them understood what was expected of them. They were to depict glorious and heroic deeds and to justify their government’s decision to intervene by revealing the devastating impact of American martial valor. This constituted a major challenge.

The only extended campaign American soldiers fought as an independent force during the First World War was the Meuse-Argonne offensive launched in late September 1918. By this time, AEF commanders had taken some steps to help correspondents. An information officer, Captain [Arthur E. Hartzell \(1891-1940\)](#), was appointed to gather and distribute news to correspondents behind the lines. Men with newspaper experience were identified among new consignments of troops arriving in France and these soldiers were given rudimentary training as press officers. The army was not abandoning control of information, but it was preparing to make a little more available to reporters. As the AEF advanced towards its jumping-off point in the final week of September 1918, an expanded group of nearly fifty correspondents assembled in their makeshift field headquarters, “a small store up a cobbled side street” in the town of Bar-le-Duc. Here, the reporters were offered an unprecedented treat: a briefing on the objectives American forces would attempt to take the next day. Standing before a map, Major General [Fox Connor \(1874-1951\)](#) explained that the operation was aimed at a crucial part of the German defensive line. If the AEF could seize it, their assault would end the war!⁴⁵

The briefing was not the end of the AEF’s fresh approach to war correspondents. During the first days of the attack, motorcycle couriers and army signalers brought a steady stream of reports to Bar-le-Duc, providing a basic but useful service. One immediate consequence was that correspondents found it easier to work from their headquarters than by travelling to the front – where chaos and confusion appeared to reign. In Bar-le-Duc, they learned essential details about the shape and progress of the advance. The material lacked elements required for compelling war reportage such as vivid eyewitness testimony and engaging quotes from combatants, but it allowed the correspondents to fill columns for their employers. Then the advance stopped. Recent scholarship suggests that the AEF’s soldiers were poorly trained and woefully ineffective. Hastily mobilized and poorly led, they suffered a disproportionately heavy toll of dead and wounded.⁴⁶

Four days after Fox Connor’s briefing at Bar-le-Duc, the AEF’s advance had ground to a bloody halt. The most telling example of tactical naivety emerged when a force of about 700 soldiers from the 77th Division were cut off and surrounded in the Argonne Forest by a superior German force. The incident instantly became known as “the story of the Lost Battalion”, its name invented by correspondents and army press officers at Bar-Le-Duc. Reported as a glorious tale of heroism in the face of daunting opposition, it won extensive coverage in [newspapers across the United States](#). Crozier recalls that the correspondents told how: “the men had fought and dug in, sleepless, hungry, thirsty somehow keeping together, sharing their last rounds of ammunition.”⁴⁷

Copy filed by [Edwin L. James \(1890-1951\)](#), the *New York Times* correspondent who accompanied the AEF during the Meuse-Argonne offensive, suggests that he considered it his duty to obscure evidence of military incompetence. James did not explore why the Lost Battalion had fallen into a trap. He noted only that: "The Germans had found an opening on their left and using a trench filtered in fully a thousand men behind our battalion out there." For days, the encircled infantrymen were battered by intense artillery and [machine gun](#) fire. Their food and ammunition ran out. When the survivors were eventually liberated by a combined effort of AEF and more experienced French soldiers, James described the survivors as an "exhausted but still determined band" and their fight as "one of the classics of the war".⁴⁸ He wrote that: "More than three-fourths of them were safe." This was what officers at divisional headquarters told him, but it was misleading. Recent scholarship indicates that more than half of those trapped were killed.⁴⁹

Edwin James was not the first war correspondent to compile a flawed first draft because those who authorized his presence told him lies, nor was he alone. The American correspondents assembled to cover the Meuse-Argonne offensive couched their descriptions of the AEF's performance in the language of hagiography. That the doughboys were suffering appalling casualties they did not deny, but their deaths were invariably heroic, their suffering always worthwhile and the German casualties always worse. The military press team were delighted with the results. Far from holding them to account, the journalists had relayed their partial and self-glorifying account of events. The press officers' report to the War Department in Washington D.C. was enthusiastic: "The Meuse-Argonne story was a very hard one to write and the correspondents wrote it remarkably well...They did a good American piece of work...they justified all the confidence which had heretofore been placed in them, and their work was worthy of all praise."⁵⁰

A *modus operandi* had been reached. Thus, in describing the 42nd "Rainbow" Division's fight to take Hill 288 at the northern end of the Bois Romagne in October 1918, Edwin James of the *New York Times* noted that:

Our losses were considerable, something more than half of the German losses – but we got the hill and they lost it. The General commanding the 42d tells me that it was the toughest and pluckiest bit of fighting that any part of the division had done.

In acknowledging that casualties had left fit for action only 800 of the 3,000 men who came to France in the division's deployment, he concluded that morale remained undimmed, "the new men borrow the spirit of the old ones and the regiments will fight at the drop of the hat if any one suggests it."⁵¹

Edwin L. James was highly regarded. He ended his career as managing editor of the *New York Times* and is credited with helping to build its reputation as a quality, liberal newspaper with an international reputation for fine reporting. He would complain bitterly about secrecy and censorship in the coverage of the [Paris Peace Conference](#) of 1919.⁵² But James, in common with his fellow American correspondents and their British and French counterparts on the Western Front, faced intense pressure to self-censor.

Censorship and Self-Censorship

A powerful reluctance to offend the soldiers they worked alongside, sensitivity to public opinion on the home front and obedience to the editorial policies of their newspapers appear to have been instinctive among correspondents accompanying armies on the Western Front. Self-censorship added to official pressure to depict the war as noble. Correspondents did not describe the maimed, [shell-shocked](#) wreckage of humanity that staggered from each engagement. They spared their readers accounts of the gruesome, rotting corpses and body parts that littered [no-man's land](#) and festered in shell holes. They depicted ordinary soldiers as fearless, idealistic martial enthusiasts. Philip Gibbs made no secret of the extent to which correspondents chose to offer a selective account of the fighting. As previously noted, he freely admitted that they were their own censors. [Ernest Hemingway \(1899-1961\)](#), the American novelist and journalist who served briefly in the war as an ambulance driver, observed that it was "...the most colossal, murderous, mismanaged butchery that has ever taken place on earth. Any writer who said otherwise lied. So the writers either wrote propaganda, shut up or fought."⁵³

These accounts suggest that war correspondents were not impotent prisoners of their military hosts and newspaper employers. Rather they had agency⁵⁴ and could, had they wished to do so, have included detail, which they chose to omit. Philip Gibbs' account, and the relative ease with which copy filed by war correspondents passed military censorship, imply that few tried to file copy that might shock their readers sufficiently to make them question the point of sending young men to fight. Plainly, they could not write accurate first drafts of history or fulfill Schudson's purposes without including such material, but would their work have been passed or published had they done so? There are good reasons to doubt it.

On 19 September 1916, less than two months before he became Britain's prime minister, [David Lloyd George \(1863-1945\)](#) told Sir [George Riddell \(1865-1934\)](#), managing editor of the *News of the World* and the man responsible for liaison between government and press: "The public know only half the story. They read of the victories; the cost is concealed."⁵⁵ On 27

December 1917, now as prime minister, he discussed the performance of war correspondents with [Charles Prestwich Scott \(1846-1932\)](#), editor and proprietor of the *Manchester Guardian*. The prime minister told Scott:

I listened last night at a dinner given to Philip Gibbs on his return from the front, to the most impressive and moving description from him of what war in the west really means, that I have ever heard. Even an audience of hardened politicians and journalists was strongly affected. If people really knew, the war would be stopped tomorrow. But of course they can't know. The correspondents don't write and the censorship would not pass the truth. What they do send is not the war, but just a pretty picture of the war with everybody doing gallant deeds.⁵⁶

There were exceptions. Some correspondents on the Western Front and elsewhere circumnavigated military censorship and the editorial policies of their newspapers by sending detailed accounts of the horrors of war to politicians and other prominent public figures in London, Paris and Washington. Some of these missives, sent as private [letters](#), evaded mail censorship and reached their intended recipients. Notable examples include the accounts of the bloody fighting on the [Gallipoli peninsula](#) recounted to "influential political and media figures" and sent to the British prime minister, [Herbert Henry Asquith \(1852-1928\)](#), by Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett, now correspondent for the Newspaper Proprietors' Association.⁵⁷ Ashmead-Bartlett's candid accounts of atrocious military leadership and its terrible, mutilating consequences are credited with bringing about the dismissal of the British commander-in-chief at Gallipoli, Sir [Ian Hamilton \(1853-1947\)](#), an event that led to the evacuation of British forces and abandonment of the Dardanelles campaign. In playing this role, mildly dissident correspondents behaved as useful channels between pillars of the political and social establishments. They ran few risks of stimulating political opposition to the war. They did not want to. Such criticism as they were prepared to express was intended to enhance the Allied war effort, not to challenge its legitimacy.

Journalists and Propaganda

Every democracy acknowledges that national security demands secrecy about the operational aspects of military activity. The British and French governments recognized early in the First World War – and the Americans as soon as they entered the fray in April 1917 – that such limited control would not meet their needs. They concluded that, to sustain [modern warfare](#), newspapers would have to be recruited to the patriotic cause. Correspondents were granted access to the battlefield on terms that accorded much higher value to the operational requirements of the military than to free speech. The terms on which they operated were choreographed to tell the military's preferred narrative from the battlefield to

the grave. Correspondents got close enough to the action to write stories of heroism that dazzled and fascinated the taxpayers back home. They rarely risked blighting their readers' appreciation with troubling narratives about grotesque wounds, squalid death or perpetual terror. Hosted by armies that fed, housed and conveyed them, they formed close bonds of trust with their military conducting officers. Such proximity spawned a version of Stockholm Syndrome.⁵⁸ Many correspondents became willing allies of military/political authority. It exploited them to create a narrative amenable to its interests. These were essentially as Lasswell⁵⁹ defined them: to mobilize hatred against the enemy; to preserve the friendship of allies; to procure the co-operation of neutrals and to demoralize the enemy. Through the pages of their willing newspapers and compliant editors, correspondents served these purposes and their respective national propaganda campaigns.

However, journalism's failure to report accurately the "faceless corpses, the scattered limbs, the heaped-up bodies and the stench of death",⁶⁰ angered soldiers. Veterans returning from the front expressed fury about the inaccurate portrayal of battles in which they had fought. Ferguson notes that British and French soldiers preferred to produce and read their own trench newspapers.⁶¹ Trench publications such as the *Wipers Times*, a satirical magazine published by British soldiers fighting in the Ypres Salient, lampooned savagely the reporting published in British national newspapers.⁶² French newspaper reporting was so tightly controlled that it helped to construct what Ferenczi terms the "patriotic lie".⁶³ French soldiers responded by publishing satirical titles such as *Le Rire aux Eclats*, *Le Poilu* and *Le Crapouillot*. German soldiers also produced [trench newspapers](#), but while these were widely read, they were heavily censored and explicitly forbidden to publish anything that took "a religious, moral or political direction".⁶⁴

Official censorship played a vital role in generating the propaganda-laced accounts that emerged from correspondents on the Western Front. The American, British and French militaries controlled news at source, restricting correspondents' access to any material that might undermine [home morale](#), help the enemy or offend allies. Other factors were also in play. These included: self-censorship by journalists and their editors; exploitation of newspapers by governments determined to maximise pro-war propaganda; and remoteness of journalists from the battles they purported to describe. Beyond these political and economic factors, their work suggests that many correspondents were overwhelmed by the scale and nature of the slaughter. Farish notes that they responded by "reverting to earlier narratives of heroic war" which provided inadequate and inappropriate "representational frames".⁶⁵ He further notes that [Charles Edward Montague \(1867-1928\)](#), a disillusioned

former censor, concluded that the correspondents had “existed in the staff world – not the combatant world”.⁶⁶

Many survivors of the Western Front, returning to their homes with painful memories of comrades killed or maimed – and the terror and suffering they had shared – regarded the war correspondents with contempt. In addition to the spontaneous literature of correction contained in their trench publications, soldiers and those who sympathized with them responded in wartime and afterwards with [poetry](#) and [fiction](#) that depicted journalists unfavourably. Lonsdale describes [Siegfried Sassoon's \(1886-1967\)](#) 1917 poem “Fight to a Finish”, in which the author, a recipient of Britain's Military Cross for his heroic service on the Western Front, “fantasises about soldiers returning from the War running through the grunting and squealing ‘Yellow Pressmen’ with their bayonets”.⁶⁷ French soldiers had no more sympathy for the journalists who had misrepresented their suffering and loss.

Conclusion

Correspondents at the front wrote little of the copy published in the newspapers of combatant nations between 1914 and 1918. The bulk of it was compiled by reporters, leader writers and columnists working at home and informed by official communiqués. The correspondents failed to serve the ethical purposes of liberal journalism to which they and their editors professed allegiance. Their profession lost the aura of glamour with which it had been associated. Moreover, though their contribution to misinforming the public was relatively small, their conduct promoted a belief among surviving members of the front generation that newspapers had failed to do their duty and were vulnerable to manipulation. It also promoted an understanding among military leaders and politicians that war correspondents could be exploited in ways that rendered them valuable as agents of state propaganda. General [Francisco Franco \(1892-1975\)](#), [Adolf Hitler \(1889-1945\)](#) and [Benito Mussolini \(1883-1945\)](#) would exploit this lesson ruthlessly during the wars that followed, and to deplorable effect. The dictators' enemies learned, too. Combat correspondents would not operate again with the freedom they had enjoyed before 1914. Newspaper readers would not expect them to speak truth to power and would be additionally delighted and impressed when the best among them managed to do so despite the barriers placed in their path.

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