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# National defence needs the Fourth Estate

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It should go without saying that a basic plank of the western democratic system of government is adequate defence, continually maintained to safeguard citizens from external threat. Indeed, Adam Smith postulated that defence of the realm was the first and foremost responsibility of a sovereign government and that this by necessity required a military force. But it is also true that in western democracy, the military is (and should be) subject to the will of elected legislative bodies. It thus follows that the debate over how much of a defence we need seems to be conducted endlessly, for better or worse. And for as many years, this debate in government bodies, institutions, and the general public, has often sadly been reduced to an oversimplified case of “guns vs. butter” for there is never enough money in the public purse to meet all demands of modern government and society.

A major element of the CPUDS mission is to educate the wider public about the often complicated issues of defence and security policy and to promote intelligent and informed debate on the subject. Through policy-oriented research, publications, podcasts and interviews, CPUDS intends to build public awareness of the vital, changeable link between standing military forces, military credibility, and ultimately, deterrence. A key factor in making this happen should be the news media in western society. Broadcast and broadsheet media remain crucial – despite the rise of social media channels – in delivering world events and news to the general public. It is a megaphone for organisations, interest groups, and governments in conveying ideas, problems, and solutions. According to OFCOM, Britain’s communications regulator, as of 2023 some 70 percent of UK adults obtain their news from television while 47 percent rely on social media channels.

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In the case of young adults (under the age of 24) these results are flipped almost to the exact percentages. The long-term, shallow decline in broadsheet newspaper readership continues, but newspapers also remain a crucial news source for the public.

Yet in an era of declining budgets and cost-cutting in publishing and broadcasting, defence journalism has suffered a particular decline compared to other sectors. Journalists covering defence and security need to come to grips with a steep learning curve requiring knowledge and understanding of military technology, military organisations, war and politics. And unlike many social media pundits, mainstream journalists usually conduct themselves based on longstanding principles of fact-checking, cultivating multiple sources, editorial oversight, and self-awareness of bias. They are an essential component of a functioning democracy and play an indispensable role in covering developments in the world of defence and security affairs. The general public often has no idea of the inherent bias or private agendas of much social media output and this constitutes a real and present danger in modern democracies as consumers face a daily cacophony of conflicting voices and opinions where fact and fiction are constantly merged. The problem is likely to become even larger with the advent of AI and “deep fakes” across social media.



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But real journalism requires investment in staff and resources. While some former serving members of the armed forces have subsequently launched successful careers as defence editors and reporters in the mainstream press, most have had no military service or academic background to prepare them for the brief to which they find themselves assigned. Labouring against deadlines in a fast-moving world, journalists must quickly gain a working understanding of concepts such as what constitutes integrated air defence, ballistic vs hypersonic missiles, tanks vs. infantry fighting vehicles, or naval frigates vs destroyers. What lies between “dumb” and “smart” munitions? Can drones engage targets without human controllers and still be a legal weapon of war? Why can't aircraft carriers sail unaccompanied into action? These and other aspects of defence and security policy have to be grasped in every assignment. All of this is no easy task if one previously worked, for instance, on the sports desk of a newspaper.

A more recent trend in broadsheet media is the use of former military officers as regular opinion contributors. While such writers are a valuable source of informed intelligence, it nonetheless remains editorial opinion and is not journalistic reportage. Such commentary is hugely important in keeping the public informed but it cannot replace the sceptical, querying nature of journalistic reporting. Both are complementary but they must remain separate. So then, what is the current state of defence reporting in broadcast and print media? It is mixed at best. Often, specifications and illustrations of military hardware and capabilities are not sourced (as was always the case previously) leaving the public guessing as to its provenance.

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Equally, photo captions often misidentify the subject depicted and some writers have yet to learn the difference between tanks and infantry fighting vehicles or between ballistic missiles and unguided rockets. This may seem trivial but, cumulatively, such errors reinforce misinformation in the public sphere and spread more confusion than enlightenment. Much of the problem probably derives from lack of resources with harried editors no doubt expecting their ex-military commentators to pick up the slack. Fact-checking copy provided by international “stringers” – along with proof-reading – often seems to take a back seat.

Western publics are currently dealing with a deluge of conflicting information about the military and the defence industry that supplies our arsenals. On the same newspaper pages one might read about the urgent needs of the Ukrainian military in their struggle to defeat the aggressor and a story about major UK pension funds divesting from defence companies on the grounds of ethical investment. Clearly, there is confusion about the nature of national defence and how we maintain a credible conventional as well as nuclear deterrent force.

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Journalists are needed to reveal industry corruption, mismanagement, and profiteering when it is discovered, but also to explain how private industry in western countries provides the competitive and technological edge over nationalised defence industries elsewhere and that our weapons export laws are the most stringent in the world, overseen by national legislation. The picture is complex but needs to be covered accurately and in depth.

A vibrant liberal democracy requires a dispassionate, credible, objective and open debate on the military, procurement, and operations, particularly in an increasingly anarchical world. CPUDS hopes to help provide the Fourth Estate with some of the tools to do that job. It will seek to establish a forum for journalists working in the defence and foreign policy sectors to exchange ideas, views and experiences. The hope is to create open discussion on the practical challenges facing the media who are working in this field, both domestically and abroad. Topics might include “embedding” with militaries during conflicts, understanding military principles of operation, or the Laws of War and how they are applied. A forum or roundtable might also assist journalists in identifying new sources for background information and research as well. The results of such efforts at inter-communications can only benefit decision-makers and the public at large at a time when storm clouds are thick on the horizon and not likely to dissipate anytime soon.

## Get in touch!

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