War and media: Constancy and convulsion

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Abstract

To consider the relationship between war and the media is to look at the way in which the media are involved in conflict, either as targets (war on the media) or as an auxiliary (war thanks to the media). On the basis of this distinction, four major developments may be cited that today combine to make war above all a media spectacle: photography, which opened the door to manipulation through stage-management; live technologies, which raise the question of journalists' critical distance vis-à-vis the material they broadcast and which can facilitate the process of using them; pressure on the media and media globalization, which have led to a change in the way the political and military authorities go about making propaganda; and, finally, the fact that censorship has increasingly come into disrepute, which has prompted the authorities to think of novel ways of controlling journalists.

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The military has long integrated into its operational planning the principles of the information society and of a world wrapped into a tight network of information media. Controlling the way war is represented has acquired the same strategic importance as the ability to disrupt the enemies' communications.[1] The "rescue" of Private Jessica Lynch, which was filmed by the US Army on 1 April 2003, is a textbook example, even if the lies surrounding Private Lynch's

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wounds, her resistance at the time of capture and the true dangers associated with the rescue mission have since been revealed.[2]

Military propaganda has long existed, but recently the use of the media in war has grown in importance and operational sophistication. Special units have been set up to think through the problems involved in producing information before and during operations and following victory. This is deemed necessary especially at a time when our democratic societies view total censorship as unacceptable and more politically harmful than militarily beneficial.

An effort should therefore be made to identify what has changed and what has remained the same in wartime media management, with due consideration for both dimensions of the relationship that today brings together war and the media, military personnel and journalists. The fact that the use of force involves going to war against the media does not mean that war is not waged thanks to the media either by means of direct propaganda or by controlling their output.[3] A brief analysis of the way in which this relationship has evolved makes it possible to better understand the recent war in Iraq and to place it into perspective.

Waging war on the media, waging war through the media

In wartime, the civilian and military authorities can easily find intolerable the concept of a free press assigning independent journalists to seek information or images that they would prefer to suppress. War correspondents with a mission to verify their information at source first appeared in the mid-nineteenth century[4] and soon caught the public eye. One famous example is William H. Russell, who covered the Crimean War (1854-55) and later the American Civil War for The Times of London. Whether to ensure success on the battlefield or to keep up morale among the troops or among civilians, governments very quickly imposed radical censorship on journalists. During the First World War, the war ministries assigned officials to the various newspapers as a means of keeping reporting under strict control. In the field, journalists were kept away from the

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1   Gérard Chaliand, *La persuasion de masse – Guerre psychologique, guerre médiatique*, Robert Laffont, Paris, 1992.

2   On 2 April, the Associated Press quoted an anonymous official to the effect that Private Lynch had been shot and The New York Times reported that she had been "shot multiple times." On 3 April, The Washington Post put the story on its front page and wrote, likewise quoting anonymous officials, that she had been "fighting to the death" and that "she did not want to be taken alive." Other stories followed. Some journalists went so far as to claim that she had been raped, though Lynch herself said that she had no memory of such an incident. To this day the media and the public continue to believe in and perpetuate the myth of Private Lynch, with books and television drama taking up where the news outlets left off. See <http://www.journalism.org/resources/research/reports/war/postwar/lynch.asp> (last visited on 17 January 2006).

3   For recent analyses, see: Michel Mathien, *L'information dans les conflits armés – du Golfe au Kosovo*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2001; Claude Beauregard, Alain Canuel, Jérôme Coutard, *Les médias et la guerre – de 1914 au World Trade Center*, Editions du Méridien, Montréal, 2002.

4   Philip Knightley, *The First Casualty – The War Correspondent as Hero & Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Iraq*, Johns Hopkins, Baltimore, 2004.

operations themselves. The view on both sides of the conflict was that the press should be in the service of State propaganda[5] — texts were censored and journalists intimidated. And this is still the case in many countries. Journalists are banned from the theatre of operations — as in Chechnya — and murdered if they defy the prohibition. They also pay with their lives in places like Algeria and Sierra Leone for revealing acts of particular savagery. Freedom of the press and the public's right to know have yet to be achieved in wartime.

What is more, destroying the enemy's media has become an avowed military aim. The Serbs shelled Sarajevo's free newspaper Oslobodjenje on several occasions and among the non-lethal weapons today in Western arsenals are electromagnetic devices capable of jamming not only military transmissions but civilian radio and television. This was done both in Belgrade and in Baghdad in 2003. Iraqi television facilities were ultimately bombed. The Americans killed a Spanish journalist on 8 April 2003 by firing on Baghdad's Palestine Hotel, where most independent journalists in Iraq were staying. Baghdad-based journalists reported that the firing was deliberate, even if it is conceivable that the building was hit by mistake in the heat of battle. Deliberate firing was also reported when the premises of Al-Jazeera and Abu Dhabi TV were hit. These incidents were described as intended to intimidate and punish journalists who dared criticize the US invasion.

Whether by bringing independent news sources to heel before they can divulge unpalatable facts or setting up their own media-relations units, States at war have learned to use journalism for their own purposes. Propaganda, brainwashing and more insidious means of persuasion are present in all armed conflicts and the media are considered necessary in every phase of conflict. Before the bullets fly, the media serve to convince and mobilize; during the hostilities they help conceal, intoxicate and galvanize; and afterwards they help legitimize what has happened, to shape perceptions of the victory and to silence any criticism.

During Rwanda's civil war, *Radio-télévision libre des Mille Collines* served as an excellent vehicle for mobilization. Following in the footsteps of a racist and inflammatory written press, this radio station waged a systematic campaign of incitement to racial hatred that was beamed over the transmitters of Rwandan government radio. A well-oiled propaganda machine, *Radio des Mille Collines* prepared the large-scale massacre of Tutsis and moderate Hutus well in advance. It aggravated existing tensions and called on people to stand ready, then to take up arms, and when the time came for genocide it coordinated the work of the killers, informing them for example of common graves that had been dug but not yet filled and urging them not to spare children, broadcasting arguments day after day to justify the bloodshed and congratulating the butchers on the results so far achieved. On 2 July 1994, one of the station's star announcers made the following declaration: "Friends, we can be proud! They have been exterminated. My friends, let us rejoice.

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5   This led, in the case of France, to the founding by anarchists in 1915 of *Le Canard enchaîné,* a satirical weekly that is the bane of dishonest politicians to this day.

God is just!" The premeditated genocide carried out by extremist Hutus was abetted by what Africa expert Jean-Pierre Chrétien has called the "powerful and well-structured propaganda that guided this 'public anger' from beginning to end."[6] In a 1992 report for the UN, Tadeusz Mazowiecki also condemned "the negative role of the media in the former Yugoslavia, which puts out false and inflammatory information and stirs up the climate of hatred and mutual prejudice that fuels the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina."[7] In an interview, he pursued: "The media encouraged hatred, through stereotypes, negative ones, of course, when speaking of the other side. That is how all the Croats became Ustashi and the Serbs Chetniks. This was done daily. Only the crimes committed by the other side were mentioned. The media in Serbia talked a lot about an alleged international conspiracy against Serbs, the Croatian media are obsessed with the syndrome of national unity and a need to oppose the enemy. When I say this, then I am thinking literally of the local press which encouraged hatred of fellow citizens of different nationalities or was directly responsible for ethnic cleansing."[8] In a less violently propagandistic manner, images that shock and arouse compassion for the purpose of attracting public support can be useful, as we saw when television screens around the world filled with columns of refugees from Kosovo, thus serving NATO as legitimization for a bombing campaign committed with no UN mandate in 1999.[9]

Regarding disinformation, two well-known cases of the media being used to conceal the deliberate intention to send information to the enemy are worthy of note. In 1941, Goebbels wished to distract observers from his preparations to invade Russia, by persuading them that his priority was invading Britain. Airborne troops had just landed on Crete. On 13 June, Goebbels had the Völkischer Beobachter publish an article entitled "The example of Crete," which pointed out the possible operational similarities with a cross-Channel invasion. Two hours after the issue hit the newsstands the Gestapo was ordered to withdraw it from sale as a means of simulating a panicked response to the realization that a major error in information management had been committed. The move was sufficiently unsubtle for there to be no possibility of it going unnoticed by foreign correspondents and spies. In 1991 the US military shared with journalists its plans for a landing by sea at Kuwait City. The Iraqi army immediately began massing troops there. However, the move was intended to distract attention from the Americans' real plans, which were to encircle Kuwait and the Iraqi troops by directly entering Iraqi territory — the famous Daguet operation.

Regarding justification, the servility of the Russian media deserves attention. Under strong pressure, it is true, they relayed the Kremlin's triumphalist

6   Jean-Pierre Chrétien, "Rwanda, la propagande du génocide", in Reporters sans frontières, *Les médias de la haine*, La Découverte, Paris, 1995, p. 25.
7   Report of T. Mazowiecki, E/CN.4/1995/54. See also: the International Centre against Censorship, *Forging War: The Media in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina*, The Bath Press, May 1994.
8   December 13, 1993, *Vreme News Digest Agency*, No. 116.
9   David D. Perlmutter, *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy – Icons of outrage in international crises*, Praeger Publishers, Westport, 1998.

declarations of success in the "struggle against terrorism" in Chechnya. Generally speaking, journalists tend to yield to the call of patriotism, as demonstrated by Fox News in 2003. Any and all criticism of the US intervention from other journalists or from the public either during or after the war was immediately categorized by the network as treason. The most radical expression of this editorial stance was the network's claim that those who questioned the grounds cited by George W. Bush were obviously supporters of Osama bin Laden. Responding in September 2003 to remarks by a CNN journalist critical of the Bush administration's pressure to toe the line, Fox News spokeswoman Irena Briganti stated that "given the choice, it's better to be viewed as a foot soldier for Bush than a spokeswoman for Al Qaeda."[10]

Free press or propaganda machine?

Each conflict since the advent of war correspondents has seen innovations in the realm of media coverage: mobilizing an entire nation by means of a censured press (First World War), radio and cinema used as a means of mass propaganda and mobilization (Second World War), more mobile filming equipment and an increase in the number of international journalists sent to the combat zone (Vietnam War), live satellite links and the appearance of the CNN worldwide non-stop news network (1991 Gulf War), and a globalized media scene, with several competing non-stop news channels representing opposing views on the issues (latest wars in Afghanistan and Iraq). The growth of this media landscape, marked as it was by four major developments in the twentieth century, is rife with consequences for public perceptions of the reality of what happens in war and for the legitimacy of certain acts of war.

Manipulating images

The first development was the advent of photography, which prompted the military to consider fakery and think about what may be shown and what not, all with a view to preventing the appearance of any undesirable image. Totalitarian regimes were the first to grasp the advantages presented by moving pictures in terms of promoting ideals and conditioning the masses. There are many ways to manipulate a photograph or a length of film footage, images that have the automatic advantage of the viewer feeling that "seeing is believing." You can use the images' aestheticizing qualities to galvanize the viewer, to dress up reality. You can portray fiction as reality, making it look like a documentary. A notorious case was the film shot at the Theresienstadt concentration camp in the summer of 1944. Its lengthy title was "Beautiful Theresienstadt - the Führer gives the Jews a city." Recently incarcerated Jews were the actors in this portrayal of an ideal internment camp: a Jewish library, orchestras, garden, playfield, etc.

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10   Quoted by Peter Johnson, "Amanpour: CNN practiced self-censorship," *USA Today,* 14/09/2003.

The film's purpose was to silence rumors that were even then spreading about extermination camps and to defend a Nazi regime under increasing military pressure.

Endeavoring to euphemize violence, Western military forces have, since Vietnam, been seeking to control news images by preventing the showing of dead people, including the enemy. The thrust of the recent media-management effort in wars is to show that war not only does not harm many civilians, but does not kill and injure many of the enemy either. During the 1991 Gulf War the violence was not so much concealed as it was disguised, and even aestheticized[11] and turned into television entertainment dressed up as television news.[12] The only images of destruction to be broadcast were film taken from Allied aircraft firing missiles with pinpoint accuracy at "strategic objectives" (bridges, factories, military bases, airports), i.e. where there could reasonably be considered to be no civilians. When civilians were hit, military spokesmen apologized and referred to them as "collateral damage." The images provided by the US military made war appear as a simple exercise in the mastery of "smart" and "clean" weapons, that is, weapons designed to spare the civilian population.

Journalists were fascinated by these images. "The aerial footage of laser-guided bombing by the US air force is extraordinary," gushed French television's Michèle Cotta (TF1), while her colleague Jean-Pierre Pernaut (TF1) enthused that the images were "absolutely a-ma-zing!" And the media channeled to its viewers the impression sought by the Pentagon of bloodless warfare. Lengthy reports were aired about the thousands of burnt-out wrecks of vehicles of all kinds that littered the Kuwait-Baghdad highway just after liberation. These images were exceptionally violent, yet conveyed the impression that somehow little human carnage had accompanied the vehicles' destruction. No bodies were left since the military had allowed journalists access to the scene only after 'cleaning' it first. A further step down this path was taken in September 2003 when it was decided to prohibit journalists from filming the coffins of dead Americans returning from Iraq.

The impact of new technologies

The second major development was satellite communications, which have raised the issue of the extent to which journalists should step back from the story and report dispassionately. The profession's ethic was long dominated by the idea that the closer to the events a piece of information is obtained and the faster it finds its way onto the newspaper page or the television screen — with no risk of manipulation or of new events altering interpretations — the greater the

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11   Arnaud Mercier, "Médias et violence durant la guerre du Golfe", in Philippe Braud, *La violence politique dans les démocraties européennes occidentales*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 1993, pp. 377-388.
12   On this conflict see Marc Ferro, *L'information en uniforme*, Ramsay, Paris, 1991; John R. MacArthur, *Second Front — Censorship and Propaganda in the Gulf War*, Hill & Wang, New York, 1992; Richard Keeble, *Secret State, Silent Press — New Militarism, the Gulf and the Modern Image of Warfare*, University of Luton Press, Luton, 1997.

chances of that story reflecting reality and helping the public to understand the situation. The resulting time pressure has affected all branches of journalism and the media have always invested a great deal in live-transmission technology (telegraph, telephone, satellite links). The 1991 Gulf War was a model of virtually non-stop live coverage thanks to the satellite technology that freed journalists of any dependence on local telephone companies.

But it was equally apparent that when the medium overtakes the message, as it were, the time needed to cross-check information — that vital aspect of the process — disappears.[13] In this case, live-communication technologies do not improve the quality of the information imparted. If a journalist has not been able to see anything, speaking to him live simply because his company possesses the technical means to do so is of no use. In the last war in Iraq, journalists were repeatedly put on air when they had nothing to say apart from hearsay. A live link enables the viewer to experience television news with greater intensity. He sees episodes of life amidst the fighting in real time, but often to the detriment of a critical distance that would otherwise afford him a broader vision of the war and what it is really about.

The impact of globalization

The third development emerges clearly when one considers that media history is the history of a growing and diverse array of information sources. On the ground this results in pressure exacerbated by ever more numerous journalists and by competition between the various media and between networks. The increasing globalization of information renders impossible the tactic of serving up one version of the facts for the nation and another for the outside world. In 1999 the Pentagon's civilian spokesman Kenneth Bacon acknowledged that NATO was being less than precise in its public statements to the press because the Serbs had instant access to that information.

In such situations the authorities may decide to show the bodies of the enemy in order to promote the impression in the public mind that victory is within grasp, though this involves the risk of shocking people and galvanizing the adversary's population and supporters, as was the case with Vietnam. Or they may decide to allow few images of destruction and enemy dead, or none at all, though this involves the risk that the public may then question how well the operation is progressing and worry about getting bogged down, as was the case with Iraq in 2003. The system of embedding journalists was doubtless designed to head off the possibility that Arab media could supply the Western networks with images beyond the control of the US military. That is probably why spectacular footage has become a favourite of those who supply information to the media. Imprisoned in his authoritarian concept of wartime information, the Iraqi information minister demonstrated with his absurd pronouncements that old-style propaganda no longer made sense in an age where satellite networks

13   Dominique Wolton, *War game – L'information et la guerre*, Flammarion, Paris, 1991.

were broadcasting images that immediately contradicted the propaganda line. Incantations of victory are no longer sufficient. What is required nowadays are spectacular and finely worked images serving as the basis for the sophisticated telling of untruths about war.

From State censorship to self-censorship

The fourth development is the fact that heavy-handed censorship is increasingly unacceptable. The method today is trickery, preventing without actually prohibiting, and appealing to journalists' sense of responsibility: in other words self-censorship. If the armed forces accept the presence of journalists, it is so the former can better oversee the latter's activities. The handling of journalists in the field has become considerably more sophisticated among senior officers. The relative freedom of journalists to write what they want has gradually been accepted because of this oversight. Now — instead of having overt military censorship, as was the case during the two World Wars and in the Algerian war of independence, when a censor was sometimes actually assigned to sit in the editorial offices of newspapers — the authorities choose to accept the presence of journalists in the field but on the authorities' terms.

But in Vietnam the Americans were hoisted by their own petard.[14] From the outset they refused to impose censorship, which would have been considered unacceptable — since the United States was not officially at war — and would have attracted media suspicion. Journalists nevertheless had to be officially accredited and a veritable information ministry — the Joint United States Public Affairs Office — was set up. Its job was to provide the press with official information by means of daily press conferences, something that has since become standard in every conflict. In many respects, war journalism is a matter of press releases and conferences. In Vietnam, most of the information about war came from press conferences and the military made things easier for the journalists by providing telex, telephones and special flights. Instructions were issued to commanders to greet and transport properly accredited journalists. The information published had to comply with a few rules laid down by the military but these posed no problem for the journalists.

Nevertheless, the American correspondents were there to talk about the life of the GI. The conflict itself and the plight of the Vietnamese were of little interest to them, especially as fighting communism seemed a legitimate undertaking. And by focusing their reporting on what was happening to the "grunts," they gradually deepened the impression that the war made no sense. The number of disillusioned commentaries and shocking images of physical and psychological damage began to rise sharply just when US public opinion began to change. When the war ended, the Pentagon was convinced that it had been the unbearable television images that had, more than anything else, turned the public against the war.

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14 Jacques Portes, "La presse et la guerre du Vietnam" in: Centre d'études des relations interculturelles, *L'opinion américaine devant la guerre du Vietnam*, Presses de la Sorbonne, Paris, 1992, pp. 113-139.

As a result, it was decided that in the future, journalists would not be allowed into the field, at least in the initial phase of conflict. A blackout was imposed during the US intervention in Grenada in 1983. The British military had already taken this measure in the Falklands war the previous year.

The 1991 Gulf War marked a major change. The "pool" system was introduced in response to criticisms in the US press, which cited the first amendment of the US constitution to obtain better access to information. Under this system, journalists were formed into small groups that were allowed access to the front from time to time and then shared the information gathered with their colleagues left behind. This approach was taken on the pretext of ensuring the journalists' safety and preventing the information-gathering from hindering the operation under way. However, its implicit purpose was to limit the journalists' access to the front as far as possible. The result was a war presented in the media as if no material damage was being done or blood spilled, in which the main images broadcast were those made by the US military, filmed by automatic cameras that were mounted in warplanes and recorded the impact of air-to-ground missiles. The entire conflict was presented in terms that were irrefutable because they were unverifiable on the ground. Those terms were "surgical strikes" and "smart weapons" and, to describe dead civilians, "collateral damage."

In response to criticism of this sham information, the military had to come up with something different for the 2003 war, all the more so as the Arab media escaped Western control, just as they had in Afghanistan in 2002. Their presence shifted the centre of gravity since the US military could no longer count on the inexistence or at least inaction of enemy media, or media perceived as such. So it had to reconsider its ban on access by journalists to the fighting. They were now accredited and "embedded" in combat units. Provided that they complied with fairly restrictive rules, including an absolute prohibition on anything that could make it possible to locate the troops, they were free to send out images and text from the combat zone. The wager was a simple one: by allowing the media to broadcast live images of combat, the military would satisfy television's desire for spectacular action, while at the same time avoiding any critical dimension, any analytical distance, at least for the journalists in the midst of the fighting.

According to a study carried out by the Washington-based Project for Excellence in Journalism, during the first week of fighting, 80% of the reports by embedded journalists broadcast by the five top US networks involved only the journalist reporting observable facts, and without a single interview. Of these reports, 60% were live and followed by no comment from the anchor. And in the 40 hours of footage studied, there were no images of anyone wounded by the firing shown. In addition, by dint of rubbing shoulders with the soldiers, living with them, and owing one's safety to them, the situation was ripe for journalists to end up sharing the point of view of their hosts, in keeping with the "Stockholm syndrome," i.e. the way that hostages come to sympathize with their kidnappers. And that is what happened, in a mixture of fascination, patriotism, empathy and self-censorship. Katie Delahaye Paine, founder of a public

relations firm in the United States, considers the system to be a "brilliant strategy" because "the better the relationship any of us have with a journalist, the better the chance of that journalist picking up and reporting our messages."[15] The job of the embedded journalist is to be the instrument of a vast public relations strategy, a fact implicitly admitted in late March 2003 by Bryan Whitman, deputy head of information services at the Pentagon: "Thanks to the medias embarked in the combat units, we see how much the American armed forces are well equipped, involved, well directed, professional and devoted."[16]

Conclusion

Rather than colliding head-on with the power of journalists, Western armed forces have shown themselves adept at playing the media game, offering tokens of openness as a means of better blunting public and media vigilance. From Kosovo to Iraq the procedure is the same: claim that you are limiting censorship to that which is needed for strategic effectiveness and protection of your forces; deter journalistic enterprise without actually disallowing it; dominate the proceedings by staging the action, if need be, but without doing so in an excessive manner. Like other entities in the public eye, the military has fully adapted to the demands of the media society and grasped the need to professionalize the mechanism by which it communicates with journalists. The media have become part of war. The military strategy today includes them as one of its objectives. Military operations are accompanied by media plans, media relations are handled by professionals and the armed forces invest in internal training to make their officers aware of the need to master the media process and nurture good relations with journalists. The military has acquired the know-how to provide "products" (reports, press kits) that meet journalists' needs.

War can therefore be turned into one huge spectacle in which powerful images are churned out, the contents of which the military endeavors to keep under its control. Somalia saw the first military landing filmed from the shore. Usually, the footage we see has been shot after the troops passed through. But in this case the enemy was so weak that the US military was able to arrange for the media to film its triumphant landing as if in a movie. But the script got away from its authors when, on 3 October 1993, the bodies of two helicopter pilots were dragged through the streets of Mogadishu by angry crowds, a scene that prompted America's withdrawal from the country.

For journalists, this situation means rethinking their practices. Old receipts such as distanced reporting on different viewpoints with identification of the sources are not any longer sufficient. Because, the result of an apparently

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15 Katie Delahaye Paine, "Army Intelligence. Army public affairs gets it right this time," *The Measurement Standard*, March 28, 2003.

16 Quoted by Reporters Sans Frontières on its website, March 28, 2003. On the role played by public relations in US management of that war, see S. Rampton, J. Stauber, *Weapons of Mass Deception — the Uses of Propaganda in Bush's War in Iraq*, New York, Jeremy P. Tarcher, 2003.

well-balanced presentation of facts is a false equilibrium between a truth stated first and an untrue answer. This is why the profession needs to develop a more critical point of view in order to systematically isolate the strategic stakes of communication from the facts. The objective is to create a mental practice of the public while reaffirming that journalists are not easily deceived by strategies of communication, of which they are the primary targets. We can imagine finding on the newspapers a systematic insert accompanying the accounts of war, aiming to unveil the means implemented by the actors to transmit their message.

For instance:

- Matter diffused at the time of a daily press conference
- Subject having occupied 15 minutes (50% of the total) what translates its importance
- Key Words: "cruel," "odious," "tyrant"
- Target: public already convinced of the founded good of war
- Objective: to disparage the adversary and to gather the people behind a patriotic reflex
- Response of the adversary: publication of a denial