

# Causing Unnecessary Anxiety? British Newspapers and the Battle of Jutland

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Jutland was the largest naval engagement of the First World War and, according to Mordal (1959, p. 265), “the greatest naval battle ever fought”. The scale of the action that took place approximately 60 miles off the coast of Denmark on May 31 and June 1, 1916, is underlined by the statistics: 151 Royal Navy vessels against 99 German; 96,000 men; 25 admirals; and 9,000 deaths. By comparison, at Trafalgar a century earlier, the decisive sea battle of the Napoleonic Wars, Nelson commanded 27 ships of the line against a 33-strong Franco-Spanish fleet.<sup>1</sup> Jutland, put simply, was the German High Fleet’s attempt to break the British naval blockade by luring out part of the Grand Fleet and causing sufficient damage that the German mercantile shipping could operate. The statistics suggest a German success in that the Royal Navy lost 115,025 tons against 61,180 and 6,097 British sailors were killed compared to 2,551 (Mordal, 1959, p. 265). Within a matter of days, however, the Royal Navy’s strength had been restored and the status quo had been re-established. As the *New York Times* put it: “The German Navy has assaulted its jailor, but is still in jail” (Kennedy, 2014, p. 335).

The sheer size of the battle would have guaranteed Jutland historical debate, but, as Halpern (2012) noted, its inconclusive result has provided an impetus for “endless discussion”(p. 48). Much of it has focussed on the British commander, John Jellicoe, who ordered the Grand Fleet to turn round and head for port when confronted by a rear guard of destroyers armed with torpedoes when a leader in the

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<sup>1</sup> Thirteen smaller ships (six British) also took part in the battle.

Nelson mould, according to critics, would have instinctively brushed them aside and pressed home the advantage to destroy the retreating German High Seas Fleet. Armchair strategists in the 1920s called for his court martial, although others have been more supportive including Winston Churchill who argued that circumspection was appropriate as Jellicoe was the only man who could have lost the war in an afternoon (Arthur, 2005). More recently, Kennedy (2014, p. 336) defended the admiral on practical grounds:

It is easy to be critical of Jellicoe's "turn away" order but how exactly does an admiral command all his warships if they were no longer sailing in parallel lines at four knots and in fine weather... but steaming at 20 knots in the fogs of the North Sea, with cruiser squadrons scattered forward for reconnaissance, destroyers trying to keep up and a battered battle-cruiser squadron either advancing into trouble or returning?

While the debate about the battle has raged for a century, the consensus about the national press's role in the First World War has been consistent in its criticism. In 1928 Ponsonby was scathing when he asserted: "There was no more discreditable period in the history of journalism than the four years of the Great War" (p. 134), and more recently Knightley (2004, p. 84) estimated that "more deliberate lies were told than in any other period of history". Both were commenting about the coverage of the Western Front where the industrial scale of the slaughter ensured that Britain embarked on a campaign of information suppression and manipulation.

Jutland was a sea battle, however, a theatre of the war in which Britain "ruled the waves". The Royal Navy was a part of the national identity, a measure of Britain's position in the world. Gordon (1996) wrote:

The Navy occupied a unique place in the national sentiment; ordinary people could recite the vital statistics of the latest battleships, children were dressed in sailor suits, posters of bearded Jack Tars sold cigarettes (p. 250).

A second Trafalgar was anticipated and this was reflected in the reporting, which differed significantly from the despatches from the trenches. This was partly due to the expectation, but also to other, practical, factors that will be discussed later. This chapter will explore whether the coverage was an anomaly in the press narrative, that instinctively responded to persuasion from the British government to manufacture support for the war, or a continuation of the hegemonic imperative. Was it the messengers, the newspapers, that changed or the message? It will do so by examining three daily newspapers, two national and one regional: the *Daily Express*, the *Daily Mirror* and the *Manchester Guardian*.

## **Methodology**

The empirical part of the research is the newspapers that were chosen because they represent a range of political views, proprietors and target audiences. The *Daily Mirror* was first published in 1903 and was originally written by women for women, but by 1916 the editorial team had been “defeminised” in the “slaughter of the guilty” (Haggerty, 2003, p. 14) and the audience had become wider, being pitched at the middle and lower classes of both sexes. Launched by Alfred Harmsworth (the future Lord Northcliffe), the *Mirror* was sold for £100,000 to his brother, Harold (Lord Rothermere), in 1914 and, from a circulation of 630,000 in 1910 (Butler and Sloman, 1975), its readership increased substantially so that in July 1915 it declared an average daily sale of 1,053,000 (Haggerty, 2003). Politically it initially aligned itself to the Labour Party but distanced itself as Rothermere – “politically naïve and ultra-conservative on social issues” (Haggerty, 2003, p. 27) – took a greater interest in what appeared in its pages. The *Daily Express* was founded by Sir Arthur Pearson in 1900, but by Jutland was surviving on loans, including from Max Aitken (Lord Beaverbrook), a Canadian-born MP who purchased the newspaper outright in

November 1916.<sup>2</sup> It had a circulation of 400,000 (Butler and Sloman, 1975) and, politically, thanks to Aitken, was aligned with the Conservatives and Unionists. The proprietor and editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, C. P. Scott, also had connections in Parliament where he had been a Liberal MP between 1895 and 1906. Consequently, he carried influence in the ruling governments from 1906 to 1922 even though the *Guardian* was based in northwest England and had a circulation of only 40,000 (Butler and Sloman, 1975).

This is a qualitative study underpinned by the methodology outlined by Richardson (2007), by which newspaper reports and headlines are evaluated in the knowledge they can carry value judgements as well as dictionary meaning. The research comprises a study of the newspapers from June 3, 1916, the first day in which news of the battle appeared, to June 16, two weeks later. All significant reports were studied, in conjunction with editorials, readers' letters and advertisements, totalling more than 150 extracts. The findings are divided into two parts, the first concentrating on the coverage in the first two editions, Saturday June 3 and Monday June 5, 1916, when the reporting wavered between describing a defeat or victory, and the second on subsequent reports which accommodated a period long enough to allow for more measured journalistic reflection.

### **Censorship and Propaganda**

The First World War from the start was, according to Finn (2010, p. 520), a "media event", and the British government's approach to newspaper coverage of the First World War was typified by the cutting of the direct subterranean cables between Germany and the United States within hours of the declaration of hostilities

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<sup>2</sup> A condition attached to Aitken's loans was that reports about his Parliamentary work should appear in the *Daily Express* (Taylor, 1972).

(Taylor, 2003). Transatlantic communication was restricted and so was the traffic of information between the armed forces and the public via the national press. Successful mass mobilisation required social consensus and political leaders were convinced that “esprit would shatter if people perceived the brutal realities of trench warfare too vividly” (Carruthers, 2011, p. 46) and, as a consequence, no casualty figures were issued until May 19, 1915. Even after that date official lists were circulated only on a “for private information of editors” basis.

This was a reflection of the influence of the popular press that had grown significantly at the start of the century. Hopkin (1970) noted that the new press had created a new readership that was “more impressionable” (p. 152) than the traditional newspaper public and the authorities quickly realised that, to sustain morale, the press had to be controlled. “D” notices, official requests not to publish material that could endanger national security, defined what could be printed and an official Press Bureau was established in August 1914 with two main functions: to control the supply the information from the War Office and the Admiralty; and to monitor every cable and telegram going to and from newspaper offices. National newspapers, the *Manchester Guardian* included, adopted an approach to news from the Western Front summed up by Lloyd George’s much-quoted quip to C. P. Scott:

If people really knew, the war would be stopped tomorrow. But of course they don’t know and can’t know. The correspondents don’t write and the censorship would not pass the truth (Knightley, 2004, p. 116).

As the quote implies, the censorship restricted the flow of news, but would have been unworkable without the co-operation of newspaper proprietors and editors and as early as July 27, 1914, a week before the outbreak of war, the major national newspapers had agreed not to publish details of military dispositions (Hopkin, 1970). Even as late as August 7, 1914, three days after the declaration of war, Scott, the editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, was expressing his opposition to the war to a local

trades council, but added “we have no choice but to do the utmost we can to assure success” (Wilson, 1970, pp. 99-100). Patriotism is a default position for the press in times of war, but news management was also provided by, according to Marquis (1978, p. 476), a “tight-knit group of ‘press lords’ who (over lunch or dinner with Lloyd George) decided what was ‘good for the country to know’.” Why were journalists suppressing news?

The obvious answer is that they all belonged to the same club, whose membership also included the most powerful politicians. Publishing a casualty list (or a letter from a wounded corporal about military bungling) would have meant expulsion from the club; social ostracism apparently meant more to the newsmen than their professional duty to inform the public (Marquis, 1978, p. 478).

Allied to the censorship was propaganda designed to bolster the war effort. The British form focussed on demonizing the enemy, an objective hugely advanced by the German invasion of Belgium and the fact that much of the war was fought on Belgian soil. Taylor argued that no matter how much the Germans attempted to justify their actions, “Poor Little Belgium” remained a “rallying cry for their enemies throughout the war” (2003, p. 176). Tales of barbarity became commonplace – less than four weeks after Britain declared war, *The Times* (“Atrocities in Belgium”, 28 August 1914, p. 7) reported that a witness saw “German soldiery chop off the arms of a baby which clung to its mother’s skirts” – and Demm (1993) wrote that the German soldier was depicted as a murderer who regularly committed acts of wickedness. It was, according to Taylor, a lasting impression:

Images of the bloated “Prussian Ogre”... the “Beastly Hun” with his sabre belt surrounding his enormous girth, busily crucifying soldiers, violating women, mutilating babies, desecrating and looting churches, are deeply implanted in the twentieth century’s gallery of popular images (2003, p. 180).

For the war at sea there was little need for propaganda – the British public had been demanding more Dreadnought-class battleships for a decade – but

ensorship ensured that newspapers demurred from reporting important losses.<sup>3</sup> This included the sinking of the battleship *Audacious* in 1914, which hit a mine off the coast of Ireland in October 1914 but was included in Royal Navy lists until the end of the war (Haste, 1977). Only on 14 November 1918 did *The Times* report the loss (“HMS Audacious”, p. 7), adding: “This was kept secret at the urgent request of the Commander-in-Chief, Grand Fleet, and the press loyally refrained from giving it any publicity.” The Battle of Jutland occurred in a news vacuum and the only civilians who were aware of it were the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, and the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, who “happened to call” (Marquis, 1978, p. 478). No information was issued because, as the First Lord of the Admiralty Arthur Balfour told George Riddell, the chairman of the *News of the World*, it “would have occasioned un-necessary anxiety” (McEwen, 1986, p. 158).

The news blackout ensured that the Admiralty did not issue a communiqué until 7 pm on June 2 and it did so, in part, because they had no choice. Damaged ships were returning to east coast ports and wounded men were filling hospitals so evidence of a battle was overwhelming. There was also a need to respond to German reports claiming victory earlier in the day. The German fleet had a shorter distance to travel and this, according to Steel and Hart (2003, p. 417) gave them an advantage in the “war of words that was to follow”. They applauded a great triumph and, in terms of ships lost, were fully justified in doing so, while the Admiralty had to face selling a strategic success to a public for whom only the complete destruction of the German fleet would have been acceptable. As Steel and Hart (2003, p. 418) noted: “They simply expected the Germans to be soundly thrashed. In the harsh light of this view what actually happened... fell far short of expectations.” Balfour, the naval

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<sup>3</sup> The popular demand was “We want eight, and we won’t wait” (Brooks, 2005, p. 2).

censor Sir Douglas Brownrigg and others crafted a “brief but completely truthful” press communiqué that admitted to heavy British losses even though, as the latter later admitted, it would be a “frightful staggerer” (Messinger, 1995, p. 116).

### **The First Reports: “Unsatisfactory for Us”**

Because of the Admiralty’s delay, the first news of the Jutland did not appear until June 3 and the newspapers, usually dealing with heavily censored dispatches from the Western Front, had a rare freedom to be frank. The front page of the *Daily Express*, for example, carried a sub-head under the main headline (“Fleets meet in the North Sea in a gigantic battle”) that stated “Heavy British losses – three battle-cruisers sunk” and a smaller report analysing the losses to the Royal Navy was remarkably close to what are now accepted as the accurate statistics: “108,000 tons and over 5,000 men”. The front page headlines also listed the destroyed British ships including the battle-cruisers *Queen Mary*, *Indefatigable* and *Invincible*. There were no attempts to demonize the enemy, on the contrary the lead story was even-handed in that it comprised the simple repetition of the statements from the Admiralty and the German Navy. The only propaganda was contained in a single column story to the right of the lead that reported the Germans had “claimed” a success. The report, from Amsterdam, included: “The German Admiralty staff’s communiqué naturally excited the most intense interest in Holland, but people, knowing by innumerable experiences the untrustworthy character of German news, awaited for the British Admiralty communiqué all day” (“Mafficking in Germany”, p. 1).

The *Manchester Guardian* also carried the enemy statement in full under the headline “German story of success” (3 June, p. 7) and reported the lost British ships,

the word “story” suggesting the possibility of exaggeration and fabrication. It differed from the *Express* in that it offered analysis. The Germans, its lead story read, “say they sank the British super-Dreadnought *Warspite*... and omit the *Invincible* from their list. Beyond doubt they are wrong; possibly they innocently mistook one vessel for another” (“Great battle in North Sea”, p. 7). The word “innocently” was surprising given that the British press had been drawing up a list of German crimes, including the alleged bayoneting of babies, since the start of the war (Kinghtley, 2004). The tone, too, lacked the normal condemnation, the claims about the *Warspite* (which was hit 13 times by shells) being attributed to error rather than malice. On page 6 there was the more familiar theme of understated bravery in the “Our London Correspondence” column that reported: “He would have been a very superficial observer who did not see in every man he met on that great fleet the same quiet readiness and resolution.” The report went on to diminish the Royal Navy’s losses, describing the *Queen Mary* as “far from our last word in guns and in speed” even though it acknowledged she had been “the show ship of 1914-15”. On page 8, however, a column headlined “A week of the war” conceded the Jutland “result was unsatisfactory for us”.

The *Daily Mirror*’s headlines on June 3, like that of the *Express*, listed the Royal Navy’s losses but went further in claiming German casualties. “2 German Dreadnoughts sunk” one sub-head claimed, and another announced that three enemy battleships had been “hit repeatedly” (“Greatest naval battle in history in North Sea”, p. 3). The doubling of the *Express*’s one German battleship could have been due to edition times because the *Mirror* included a 1 am communiqué from Jellicoe that reported that one Dreadnought had been “blown up in an attack by British destroyers” and another was believed to have been “sunk by gunfire”

("Admiral Sir John Jellicoe's estimate", p. 3). Both claims, it transpired, were wrong as the High Seas Fleet lost the battle-cruiser *Lutzow* and the pre-Dreadnought battleship *Pommern*, but no Dreadnoughts. Lower down on the front page, in a story headlined "Foe admiral's version of the battle" there was a report of a speech in the Reichstag that stated: "Our young navy has gained a great and splendid success." "Foe" and "version" were words imbued with subjectivity.

Those words might have been weighted but it mattered little because the coverage overall read like a defeat to a British public used to a diet of successes. Lloyd George summed up the norm when he told Riddell (McEwen, 1986) in September 1916: "The public knows only half the story. They read of victories; the cost is concealed" (p. 168), and as a consequence the stark news that three battle-cruisers and at least eight other vessels being sunk was greeted with dismay in Britain. Steel and Hart (2003, p. 421) wrote of "stunned and horrified disbelief" and that some naval personnel suffered verbal abuse from "wilder spirits". Gordon (1996, p. 499) wrote that the crew of HMS Malaya received a "mixed reception" from dock workers at Invergordon. Arnold Ridley, the playwright and actor best remembered for his part of Godfrey in *Dad's Army*, was in Devonport recovering from a shrapnel wound received while serving near Arras.<sup>4</sup> He noted:

Not only did the first reports suggest a major defeat, but most of the sunken ships were Devonport commissioned. Union Street seemed full of women - some hysterical, some crying quietly and others, grey-faced with staring unseeing eyes and leading small children by the hand. They had no illusions, these women - they knew only too well that, when large ships were sunk in battle in the North Sea, there could be but few survivors (Van Emden and Piuk, 2014, p. 61).

The Royal Navy was furious that the Admiralty had made no attempt to explain the strategic significance of the battle (Gordon, p. 498). The government, too, felt that

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<sup>4</sup> *Dad's Army*, a television programme about the British Home Guard in the Second World War, was broadcast on the BBC from 1968 to 1977.

reports had been too gloomy and Balfour persuaded Winston Churchill, who was “sulking in ‘retirement’,” to write a “semi-official précis... based on official documents” that was released at 7pm on June 3 (Marquis, 1978, p. 478).

This, and further statement on June 4, boosted German losses and marked a change in mood in Fleet Street. The *Daily Express*'s front page of Monday, June 5, included a headline “We won the action” by Lord Beresford, a former MP and admiral, in which he accused the press of “pessimistic views” about the battle, although a sub-editor had added in brackets “not in the *Daily Express*”. To underline the point, the next sentence - “There is no justification for them.” - was set in bold. The lead story was also heavily influenced by the propaganda message, the headline reading “18 German warships (compared to 14 British) lost in great battle”. The copy, too, was more condemnatory. “That the accounts they have given to the world are false is certain...The Admiralty entertain no doubt that the German losses are heavier than the British - not merely relative to the strength of the two fleets, but absolutely.” Alongside the lead another story (“We know better”, p. 1) stated that the German sailors also discounted the alleged triumph. “When the men were shown yesterday's mad ‘victory’ reports from Berlin they smiled and said, ‘Unfortunately, we know better’.” At the top of the page a headline claimed “The *Hindenburg*, Germany's greatest warship, lost”. The *Hindenburg* was not at Jutland. On page 4 an editorial headlined “Victors do not run away” stated: “Our allies and neutral nations agreed in ridiculing the German boast that their fleet has, in any sense of the word, defeated the British.”

Readers of the *Daily Mirror* on June 5, 1916, had to go inside the newspaper to discover more optimistic news about Jutland. Page one was devoted entirely to photographs under the headline “Women who mourn and the men who have died”, the largest picture being reserved for Grace Clark, who had been due to marry a

naval chaplain that day, but on page 3, it announced that enemy losses had exceeded those of the Royal Navy, claiming that the Germans had lost at least 18 ships (“German losses are heavier than the British”). The story began: “Officers who landed at an East Coast town... were astounded to find that the public thought the British Navy had suffered defeat.” The *Mirror* also carried an interview on page 2 with Lord Beresford under the headline “I declare it a British victory”, but an editorial on page 5 (“Questions”) suggested the newspaper had not been persuaded entirely:

The third question that many bereaved but brave people asked was in the nature of a supplication, a hope, that the Admiralty will refrain from excuses, and official people from the absurdity of trying to pretend that we have won a big victory in disguise.

The *Manchester Guardian* also reflected the confusion in its “Our London Correspondence” editorial column on June 5 (p. 4). “The more we learn about the great sea battle,” it read, “the more people are puzzled and even indignant about the first official report on the subject.” It added: “The navy - and it is not given to boasting - considers that it has won what victory there was in this admittedly indecisive action.” The lead story on page 5, the main news page, was more forthright in claiming victory, its headlines stating “German losses the heavier”. This was inaccurate, although it reflected the Admiralty’s exaggerated estimates, but the *Guardian* cast doubts on the German reports rather than the British, a sub-head reporting “Berlin reports known certainly to be untrue”. Under another headline, “Story of the battle” (p. 5), it was stated the men who had fought in the battle were sure that “the enemy received a most salutary lesson before they slunk away into their haven of refuge”. “Slunk” was chosen to denigrate the enemy and could be compared to the report from Edinburgh that described the Royal Navy’s return to port in glowing terms. “I watched the mighty ships pass out; I watched the

victorious ships one by one come home. I emphasise the word victorious" ("How the fleet sailed and came back", p. 5).

### **Kitchener Lost, the Battle "Won"**

The ephemeral nature of news was underlined in the editions of June 7 when Jutland, four days after first entering the national consciousness, was supplanted as the lead story. Lord Kitchener, the Secretary of State for War, had been killed, going down with 600 others when the cruiser *Hampshire* struck a German mine close to the Orkneys. The death of the field marshal the *Daily Express* described as "The man who prepared the way for victory" (June 7, 1916, p. 1) dominated the news agenda, and the focus of the coverage of the North Sea battle moved away from the outcome and on to a debate over how the initial Admiralty reports had been so downbeat. According to Steel and Hart (2003), it was the German confession that they had concealed the loss of the battle-cruiser *Lutzow* and the light cruiser *Rostock* that eradicated any doubts that Jutland had been a qualified British success. This allowed the newspapers licence for anti-German rhetoric and to conduct a debate about the merits of the initial despatch from the Admiralty.

All the newspapers asserted the Germans had distorted the facts about Jutland, the *Daily Express* almost on a daily basis. Thus on June 7 there were headlines "Nailing down the German Lies" and "More fabrications" (p. 1), and a report stated: "Germany's glib stories of victory in the naval battle are now disbelieved by the whole world"; on June 9 headlines read "Tearing the truth out of Germany" and "Admission of Falsehood by German's naval staff" (p. 1); on June 12 "Covering up the facts" and "German efforts to hide the naval losses" (p. 5); and on June 16 "Still unable to tell the truth" (p. 5). The *Daily Mirror* carried an editorial on June 9 ("Their way and ours", p. 5) that compared the communiqués from the

Admiralty and the German Navy, an exercise in linguistic criticism that also allowed the paper to excuse its own initial, pessimistic, reports. "British way - to claim defeat and then find victory," it read. "German way - to claim victory, then find defeat." The leader also asserted: "If you are a British official you let your public frankly - and rightly - know about losses sustained", which was disingenuous given that the newspaper was aware that the number of casualties on the Western Front was being withheld by the War Office. The editorial was part of a campaign to undermine the authenticity of reports coming from Germany and was underlined by a cartoon on June 15 (p. 5) that had a caricature of the Kaiser. "There's only one thing that troubles me," he says. "That is, that if we have many more great naval victories, I shan't have any navy left!" The following day, June 16, one *Mirror* headline read "Hun lie factory's finest output" (p. 2), a phrase that used the derogatory term Hun that became a feature of British newspapers between 1914 and 1918 while implying that there was a industrial-scale conveyor belt of disinformation emanating from Berlin. The *Manchester Guardian's* disparaging of German news releases was less strident than that of the *Mirror* and the *Express*, but was there, nevertheless, in the headlines "Enemy's false claims" (June 7, p. 5) and "Why false news was spread" ("Not a victory", June 10, p. 7.), all of which were a departure from the "innocent" mistakes they reported initially.

The anti-German narrative coincided with analysis of Admiralty's first communiqué, and none was complimentary. An editorial in *Daily Express*, under the headline "That message!" (June 8, 1916, p. 4), read: "If ever an official despatch was calculated to cause the gravest misgivings in the public mind it was this communication." It was a theme touched upon by a reader's letter on June 9, from H. C. F., ("Mr Balfour's excuses", p. 5) that stated: "The Admiralty had only to phrase their announcement more correctly, while utilising precisely the same information,

to have avoided the unpleasant and unsatisfactory incident which marked the return of our victorious seamen to their home." The letter would have had to pass editorial gatekeepers (if, indeed, it was a genuine letter from the public and not a journalist in disguise), and was likely to conform with the newspaper's view, a notion that was confirmed the following day when the *Express* printed what it believed should have been announced on June 2. It read:

A great naval action was fought in the North Sea on Wednesday the 31<sup>st</sup>. Though only a portion of our Fleet was engaged by the whole, or almost the whole, of the German High Sea Fleet, we defeated the Germans and sent them back to their ports in confusion. Their losses were exceedingly heavy ("How to tell the news", June 10, p. 5).

The *Manchester Guardian* ("The test of naval success", June 8, p. 5) reported a speech by Balfour in which the First Lord of the Admiralty agreed first newspapers reports about Jutland had struck a "tragic note". He added: "If my candour, if my desire immediately to let the public know the best and the worst was in any way responsible for that result, I can only express my regret." An accompanying editorial ("The naval battle", p. 4) carried a censure: "We are not quite satisfied with the statement." The *Daily Mirror* also reported Balfour's speech under the headline "The 'whole truth' of naval fight" (June 8, 1916, p. 2) The report noted: "Totally erroneous inferences were built on the first message, and those papers who jumped at conclusions should have a little passing prick of conscience." What could have followed, and did not, was "including the *Daily Mirror*".

The condemnation of the Admiralty's first communiqué had an element of self-interest as newspapers needed to explain why their reports had been misleading, but perspective was available during the study period, albeit in another newspaper, the *Observer* "There is too much of the 'frantic boast and foolish word' going about," a comment piece ("The sea-battle and its lessons", June 11, p. 8) read. It continued:

“Especially cheap is the taunt that the Germans ran away from the Grand Fleet. They were not out for suicide... When that day comes it is not likely that the German Navy will shrink from any sacrifice and we have learned enough from this battle to make sure that we will find German sailors tough and skilful foemen.” This thoughtful critique differed strikingly from the heavily censored propaganda coming from the land war.

## **Conclusion**

In his otherwise excellent book about Jutland, Gordon was scathing about the press, ascribing the Royal Navy’s “pathological mistrust of the media” (1996, pp. 498-9) to the coverage of battle. He also wrote of the “mendacious constructions of journalists” (p. 505). This conforms to the historical judgement of the national press in the First World War, a verdict summed up by Knightley (2004, p. 532) who described the conflict as a “disaster for journalism”. This chapter has tried to challenge this orthodoxy, at least in terms of the reporting of the Battle of Jutland, while acknowledging the motivations behind that coverage conformed to the template set on the Western Front. This research has shown that the reports of the battle did not conform to the normal propaganda model. Instead, there was no attempt to diminish British losses – the casualty figures were extraordinarily accurate on June 3, 1916, given that the Grand Fleet had not reached port by print deadlines – and the painting of the Germans as ogres in uniform was watered down to accusations of vainglory and distortion. Even that had a sub-motive because the press had reasons to explain why its original reports were being challenged.

This is not to assert that the press coverage of Jutland marked a new zeal by newspapers to the cause of independent reporting. Rather it was a breakdown in the propaganda machine. The Admiralty, unable to easily hide its losses as its ships

returned to port, simply told the truth and, in a war where obfuscation was the norm, the bare un-spun facts were taken as a major reverse. This was acknowledged by Gordon who wrote that the Admiralty's initial statement on Jutland, was "strictly honest about British losses" and "would make things worse" (p. 498). The Admiralty, too, acknowledged its public relations shortcomings by creating a Naval Publicity Department a month after the battle in an attempt to "avoid the sort of presentational mistakes which had been made in dealings with the press after Jutland"(Gordon, 1996, p. 507).<sup>5</sup> The Navy made no attempt to put a gloss on the battle, admitted its losses and Fleet Street, just as it did on the Western Front, reported what it was given. It was business as usual.

For once, to paraphrase Lloyd George, the people really knew thanks to national newspapers and, although Finn (2010), Bourke (1999) and Schneider (1997) have asserted that local newspapers, soldiers' letters and Red Cross despatches ensured that the British public were not wholly ignorant of conditions on the Western Front, this was exceptional. Yet, the same chain of news supply after Jutland operated a month later when correspondents reported the Somme, it was the reaction of generals, the War Office and the information being emitted from them that differed, and with it the reports that appeared in Britain's newspapers. As a consequence the death of 400,000 British and Empire soldiers in a 141-day battle that began on July 1, 1916, was hidden by reports of heroic advances and territorial gains to an extent that even on November 15 the *Manchester Guardian* printed the headline proclaiming "The British Victory" (p. 6.). It was not alone and the effect of this distortion, once the full scale of the military disaster became known, damaged the

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<sup>5</sup> Rudyard Kipling and John Buchan, the author of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, were considered as consultants for the new department before Julian Corbett (a historian at the Naval War College) and Filson Young, a journalist, were employed (Gordon, 1996, p. 507).

reputation of British journalism. This chapter has shown that the reporting of Jutland can largely be exempted from that historical verdict.

Nevertheless, the coverage of the battle had effects beyond fuelling the subsequent historical debate. Surprisingly, given its scale and importance, the battle was not debated in Parliament until June 22, 1916, when, during a short exchange a Conservative MP, Ronald McNeill called for the suspension of the *Daily News* and condemned newspapers generally. The Home Secretary Herbert Samuel, dismissing the call for suppression, replied: "I am afraid a great many people when they received the first news of the battle took a somewhat depressed view of the facts" (Hansard, 1916, pp. 302-3). This partly exonerated the press, but nevertheless was a harbinger of more serious threats to press freedom in the Second World War. There was also a hint of criticism of the Admiralty as the suppliers of the first news, but in the long term it benefitted from its honesty. Brownrigg, the naval censor, wrote: "Whatever the rights or wrongs of the first Admiralty communiqué... our reputation for telling the truth was re-established, and from that time onward, I believe it is fair to say that what appeared in our communiqués was accepted as fact" (Messinger, 1995, p. 116).

The most enduring consequence of the Admiralty's frankness, however, is that it played a part in placing the dead of Jutland in the litany of First World War memories. More than 6,000 British sailors died in the North Sea and, while that was overshadowed by the 19,240 killed at the Somme on July 1, 1916 (Carruthers, 2011), it was still a disaster in human terms to compare with the darker days of the Western Front. Yet, stripped of the censorship and propaganda that hid the horrors of the trenches, and because strategic victories lack the poignancy of catastrophic military

miscalculation, Jutland's casualties have receded in the ranks of commemoration.

Steel and Hart (2003, p. 7) wrote:

The Somme and Passchendaele still weave their grim fascination, but, while the deaths of the men in the "Pals Regiments" are morbidly "celebrated", the sacrifice of the hapless crews of the *Indefatigable*, the *Queen Mary*, the *Invincible*, the *Defence*, the *Black Prince*, the *Shark*, the *Ardent* and the *Broke*... are commemorated mainly by a few dramatic photographs that linger round the edges of folk memory.

On June 15, 1916, the *Manchester Guardian* printed a report on a memorial service to the servicemen killed at Jutland in which the Bishop of Liverpool said they would be "forever immortal" ("Liverpool's memorial service to sailors," p. 6). He was a right, but only to a degree.

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