Contemporary Crises **13**: 253–274, 1989.
© 1989 *Kluwer Academic Publishers. Printed in the Netherlands.*

Researching the powerful: Problems and possibilities of social research

KEVIN WILLIAMS
Department of Sociology, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ, UK

Abstract. The culture of the powerful has yet to receive the scrutiny required for social science to build up a full picture of social relations. This paper attempts to examine the problems that confront the researcher in the study of powerful groups and institutions in our society. It is based on the author's experience of working on the first piece of independent social science research commissioned by the British Ministry of Defence – an enquiry into the relations between the military and the media at times of armed conflict, with particular reference to the Falklands conflict of 1982. Powerful interests will not provide the opportunity for social scientists to study their workings at first hand. However with the increased involvement of these interests in the sponsorship of research the social scientist is in a position to relate his or her dealings with the powerful as part of the research process. The paper focusses on four aspects of the research process: the commissioning of the project, the negotiation of access to the key figures and documentary material, the research techniques used, and the response to the findings of the study.

Social scientists, despite recognising the centrality of power in understanding social processes, have not devoted the same effort to studying the culture of the powerful as they have to the culture of the powerless. Calls to "study up" (for example, Nader 1974; Bell and Encel 1978) have, by and large, been ignored. This is a reflection of a pessimism about the possibilities of studying the powerful. Social scientists stress the difficulties involved in such research. This paper attempts to use the author's experience of working on the first piece of "independent social science research" commissioned by the British Ministry of Defence to examine the problems, and illustrate the possibilities, of researching the powerful. Without minimising the obstacles to such research, the paper seeks to argue that the opportunities to study the powerful are more real than most researchers imagine.

The observations offered, it must be stressed, are based on a specific piece of research. The precise focus of the study was the examination of media-military relations at times of armed conflict, with particular reference to the Falklands war. Any generalisation must be treated with caution. The Ministry of Defence, for example, is the most closed and secretive of government departments, while the military are not typical of the powerful in their degree of isolation and autonomy from the rest of British society. The observations are also made in the belief of the urgency of such research. It is essential if citizens

are going to play a more active role in shaping the quality of life, their lives, that they know something about, as Nader says, "those who shape attitudes and actually control institutional structures" (Nader 1974). That decisions in the contemporary world can determine the very survival of human life emphasises the urgent need for this knowledge.

It is also likely that in the near future more social scientists are going to find themselves in a position to "study up". Powerful interests, particularly government department and agencies, are becoming the major sponsors of social science research in Britain. This is a development which can only be looked on with unease. But as McDermott points out it will also enable researchers "to scrutinise the culture of bureaucracy, to analyse power networks and to discover the hidden agendas of social policy and contract research" (McDermott 1987). The chance to "study up" will not be provided by the powerful. No funding will be available from such sources to analyse the exercise of power. It will only emerge if social scientists are prepared to consider their dealings with the powerful as part of the research agenda.

There is a problem of whom we define the "powerful" to be. The term is used in a deliberately loose sense in this paper. It is important to get away from the view of powerful organisations as homogeneous bodies, with a single ideology, directed, from the top, by a small, elite group. Rather such bodies are, as Mungham and Thomas note, "complex coalitions of competing interests, sometimes in harmony, sometimes not and where there is a constant negotiation for position, prestige and material advantage" (Mungham and Thomas 1981). Power is exercised in this environment of rivalry, tensions and conflicting interests. The dynamic nature of the competition means that the "powerful" can change depending on the event, the issue, the circumstances at hand or the personalities involved. Thus power is diffuse, not necessarily vested in those who occupy the formal offices of power. It is the notion of a physiology, rather than an anatomy, of power that underlies the use of a loose definition of the "powerful".

Social science and the powerful

There is, as Mungham and Thomas note, a "defeatism" amongst social scientists in their dealings with the powerful (Mungham and Thomas 1981). Researchers are quick to point to the problems involved. They argue the powerful are unwilling to cooperate, reticent to talk and protective of their privacy. In Britain reference is made to the culture of secrecy that surrounds the powerful. The problems of negotiating access are often seen as insurmountable. There is also fear. The powerful can make things difficult for the researcher. They can retaliate if things go wrong. Sanctions can be imposed which make research

impossible to complete or which cause personal or professional problems. There is also the fear of being compromised by having dealings with groups such as the police, the military or the civil service. There is the feeling that somehow you are tainted by taking money from such sponsors. There is also a dismissive attitude to the findings that emerge from such research. It is regarded as adding little to our understanding. The outcome is seen as research which maintains the status quo by avoiding questions which challenge the basic structures of society or the values of the sponsoring body.

There is some truth in these feelings and fears. But they seem to exaggerate the problems and deny the possibilities of doing research on the powerful. It is a gloomy outlook, not in keeping with critical analysis. Social research should be inclined to exposure. Mechanisms exist, as Bell notes, by which the powerful "translate might into right" (Bell 1978). We seem to know little about these mechanisms and how they work. More knowledge of how ideological control is produced in concrete practice would appear necessary to those who seek to understand social realities as well as those seeking to empower people.

Without doubt a price has to be paid in undertaking such research. Negotiations have to be entered into and compromises made. But this process is not so very different from research involving other groups in society. It simply requires more patience and effort with, perhaps, greater risks attached to failure. It should be pointed out that the researcher does not have to give up everything in order to gain acceptance. He or she does have some bargaining powers in these negotiations.

It can also be argued that the "defeatism" is based on a misreading of the powerful and their world. In spite of the difficulties – and these are many and real – the powerful can be more open and cooperative than many social scientists believe. They are often prepared to discuss matters and in many cases welcome the chance to place their views on the record. Their motives are mixed. They can emanate from a desire to correct what they see as misconceptions of their role and work. Civil servants, for example, see research as an opportunity to respond to what they regard as a lack of public appreciation of what they do. Talking to a researcher appears to be one of the few channels of communication they have to the public. The powerful also talk to the researcher to counter challenges from other interests within their institution. Powerful institutions are not monolithic. A large number of interests exist inside institutions; interests which are in a state of flux and change. Such a situation can work in the researcher's favour. This was the case in our study of the Ministry of Defence.

Background

In the summer of 1982 the Ministry of Defence approached several universities and colleges asking them to submit a proposal to study the "relations between governments, armed services and the media at times of armed conflict". The invitation followed an enquiry held by the Select Defence Committee of the House of Commons into the handling of information during the Falklands war. The Ministry sought an independent study of the problems that had beset the organisation and implementation of information policy during the campaign. The only stipulation was that examination of the handling of information in conflicts involving other societies should be included. Special mention was made of the war in Vietnam. This conflict dominates official thinking about the role of the media in modern warfare. Vietnam is seen as "the war the media lost". As early as 1970 the British military had learned this lesson. Speaking at a Royal United Service Institute seminar that year a senior military officer declared that if Britain was to find itself at war again then "we would have to ask ourselves, are we going to let cameras loose on the battlefield?" (RUSI 1970). Senior TV people present echoed these fears about the intrusive nature of their medium. Besides mention of Vietnam there were no other terms of reference.

In the event the Ministry awarded two research contracts. The Department of War Studies at King's College, London, received a grant to examine the impact of speculation by military experts at home on the course of the campaign (Adams 1986). The larger and more comprehensive study was allocated to the Centre for Journalism Studies at University College, Cardiff. Work on the project began in January 1983. It was to be a study of four major post war conflicts – Suez, Vietnam, the 1982 Israeli invasion of the Lebanon (the ill named Operation Peace for Galilee) and the Falklands. Suez was choosen for comparison with the Falklands while the inclusion of the Lebanon was, in part, a response to the praise heaped on the Israeli system of news management and censorship by the British media. In its submission to the Select Committee enquiry the BBC, for example, said, "the most efficient military censorship known to the BBC is the Israeli system, which, until recently had operated in a way which suits both journalists and the requirements of military security" (House of Commons Select Defence Committee 1982). The *News of the World* was more direct. "Next time", it told the Ministry of Defence, "why don't you borrow the Israeli Army's Director of Public Relations?". It was later decided, with the Ministry's agreement, to include the US invasion of the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada, which occurred in October, 1983. The US military and civilian planners of the operation had drawn from the experiences of the Falklands campaign when deciding how to handle the media (Mercer et al. 1987).

The study involved nearly 500 interviews. It talked to more of the principal figures in the Falklands conflict than anyone else. There were also interviews with senior military, political and media figures in the US and Israel. The research team clocked up more than 30,000 miles in the process. The end product was a two volume, 250,000 word report presented to the Ministry in 1985. Subsequently, if somewhat belatedly, the Ministry presented the report to Parliament in July, 1986. The report made 108 recommendations directed at the government, the military and the media. The report was published in 1987 in an abridged form in the book *The Fog of War.*

The research team included three principal researchers, two of whom were journalists. One, the founder of the Centre, had had a career in journalism which stretched back to well before the Second World War. He had been the editor of the celebrated magazine *Picture Post* and his reputation as one of Britain's greatest post war reporters had been recognised by his knighthood for services to journalism. The other journalist was also highly respected in the profession. He had been the youngest ever news editor of the *Sunday Times,* eventually reaching the heights of managing editor under Harold Evans. He had been the first editor of Channel Four News when it was launched in 1982. The Research Director was a senior lecturer in the Department of Sociology at Cardiff. In addition there was a research officer – myself – and a research assistant.

The composition of the team, after some initial changes, was one of the distinctive features of the project. The Ministry insisted on the inclusion of a senior, and well respected, journalist to take responsibility for the interviewing of the main figures in the Falklands war. It was not happy about allowing all the research team access to these people. This appeared to indicate a greater degree of comfort with the journalist as researcher than the social scientist. The nature and conduct of the research was influenced by the clash of perspectives of the journalist and social scientist. For the journalists the narrative dimension of the study was foremost while the social scientists sought to analyse the underlying themes. The differences within the research team were to be a significant factor in determining the conduct of the research and the final writing up of the report.

The research team had an opportunity to make a contribution to the development of a sociology of information management. The Falklands war provided a unique set of circumstances to examine the factors which influence the flow of information in British society. The war brought relations between powerful institutional interests into the open. As Robert Harris states, the war "briefly illuminated aspects of British society usually hidden from view. It exposed the *habitual abuses* (his italics) by the armed forces, government, Whitehall and the media; it did not create them" (Harris 1983). The research team had the chance to study information management from the perspective of

official sources. Whether the study made the most of this opportunity is for the reader to decide. It is not the intention to discuss the findings here. Rather this paper will look at the processes involved in doing the research. These will be examined under four headings – the commissioning of the research, access, research techniques and responses to the study.

Commisioning the study

> We have asked nine universities and colleges to put proposals to us by the autumn, including those two which have special research groups, as to what kind of study they might do into our relations with the media and how we should handle a wartime situation. All nine of them have been asked to do that on the basis we might fund a small research programme over the next two to three years. We shall have to give them a little time. That is news, I hope, to everybody.
> (Sir Frank Cooper, then Parliament Under Secretary, Ministry of Defence, giving evidence to the House of Commons Select Defence Committee on the first day of its enquiry into the handling of information during the Falklands conflict, July 21st, 1982.)

Motives

The Ministry's decision to commission a study of its handling of information during the Falklands war seems to have been influenced by a number of motives. The immediate reason lay in the war of words which had developed between the Ministry and the media during the campaign.[1] Toward the end of the fighting these skirmishes became a full scale war. The first shots were fired by Alan Protheroe, then Assistant Director General of the BBC. Smarting, perhaps, from criticisms of the BBC's "lack of patriotism" Protheroe launched a stinging attack on the Ministry's information policy. He accused the government of a "total failure of perception of the importance of the information war". For Protheroe this was why Britain had "lost the information war". He was in no doubt about who was to blame. "The experts, military and civilian, in the government information services have been discounted and virtually eliminated from full and proper participation by the administrative civil service". For Protheroe there was a "strong case for an enquiry into the handling of public information by the Ministry of Defence" (Protheroe 1982).

Others in the media took up Protheroe's call to arms. Some of the Ministry's natural supporters in the press weighed in with criticism of its performance. Anthony Lejeune, for example, writing in the *Daily Mail,* referred to the Ministry's lack of concern over information. He criticised the "Minister and his top civil servants" for their "indifference". "From the beginning of the

Falklands affair", he wrote, "a painful contrast was evident between the spectacular feat of coordination which got the Taskforce under way and the muffled incompetence with which the public relations – or to use a more significant term, political warfare – side of the expedition was handled" (Lejeune 1982).

While there was concern about public information, the attitude of the media can be best explained by the frustrations felt in face of getting in on the "biggest story" since the end of the Second World War. The intensity of feeling was accentuated by the fact the British press was in the middle of a major circulation war. Many newspapers were hoping to cash in on the war – as well as on games such as bingo – to increase readership. The delaying tactics of the Ministry caused much bitterness and resentment in such circumstances. The ire of the broadcasters had been raised as a result of having to cover the "big story" without pictures. It took film from the South Atlantic longer to get back to Britain than the dispatches of William Howard Russell, Britain's first war correspondent, had taken to get back from the Crimea in the 1860s. The result was the Ministry was bombarded from all sections of the media following the recapture of Port Stanley and the successful completion of the military campaign.

Calls for an independent enquiry were rejected by the government. However the Select Defence Committee announced it would hold an enquiry thereby providing the forum for the media to air their complaints at those they held responsible. The Ministry was placed under intense pressure. To deflect some of the criticism and defuse the situation, the Ministry announced it was going to set up an independent study to learn the lessons of the information war. Thus at one level the study was a simple delaying tactic.

At another level it is possible to speculate the study saw the light of day because of the position of the two men at the top of the Ministry at that time. For the Minister, John Nott, and his senior civil servant, Sir Frank Cooper, it had not been the best of wars. Both had borne the brunt of the criticism of the Ministry's performance. John Nott had been denounced in the British press at the time of the Argentine invasion as one of "Thatcher's guilty men". There were vociferous calls from Parliament, including some from backbench colleagues, for Nott's resignation. There was also sniping at his performance during the campaign from inside government. The war was the culmination of an unhappy stay at the Ministry. His tenure of office will be remembered by the internal squabbling that took place following the announcements of budget cuts in the 1981 Defence Review.

Sir Frank Cooper had been the target of much of the media's most trenchant criticism – particularly over the charge he had deliberately misled the media over the San Carlos landings (see Mercer et al. 1987; Harris 1983). This would not have worried such an ebullient and combative person as Sir Frank. How-

ever, behind the scences, he had been involved in a fierce struggle with Mrs Thatcher's man at Number Ten, Bernard Ingham. Ingham, prior to the war, had as the Prime Minister's Press Secretary been extending his influence throughout Whitehall. This brought him into conflict with Whitehall's largest department and Ingham used the war to further criticise the Ministry of Defence's organisation of information policy. The struggle between him and Cooper seems to have been accentuated by poor personal relations. In the event Nott and Cooper were to leave the Ministry. Nott retired from political life and Cooper came to the end of his governmental career. The study could be seen as their parting gift; a gift, perhaps, to embarrass colleagues and successors alike.

The commissioning of the research must also be put in the context of the struggle over information policy which took place inside the Ministry following the war. Civil-military rivalries have been a characteristic of the Ministry since its inception in 1964. These tensions are incorporated into the structure of the public relations operation. Each of the Service ministries when they were absorbed into the new unified department maintained their own PR organisation. On the organisational charts the Service PR heads are directly responsible to the Ministry of Defence's Chief of PR, a civilian; they are in effect his military deputies. However, the Service PR heads are appointed by their own chiefs of staff, and therefore their first loyalty is to them. In addition civilian PR officers in Whitehall belong to a structure which is separate from the department within which they serve. They are categorised as information or public relations specialists under the Central Office of Information (COI). Thus the Chief of PR at the Ministry of Defence is usually a professional PR officer.[2] There are often tensions between the professional PR specialists and the administrative civil servants over information policy. During the Falklands war the PR officers and the military PR heads were resentful at the way in which they had been pushed aside by the administrative civil servants. They believed they were, at best, not used properly, at worst, excluded. In the debate over information policy which ensued they were determined to reassert their position. An independent study could be regarded as a useful tool in this debate and therefore there was less hostility to its establishment than there might have been.

Finally it should also be said there were many inside the Ministry, particularly those involved in PR at the sharp end, who saw the merits of an independent study. The Select Committee had been a political affair. A more dispassionate appraisal was considered as helpful in learning the lessons of what went wrong and how the needs of military security could be better reconciled with the right to know. This is an important point. To have any degree of success there has to be some recognition from the host organisation, as well as the researcher, that the research is worthwhile in its own right.

Political expediency, however, was at the heart of the commissioning process. Political considerations were a factor at every stage of the research process – tendering, conduct of the research, access, interviewing, publication of findings and so on. This should not be seen as unusual or surprising. Social research is a political activity. With this study the politics were more apparent. Wenger discusses the models which condition the respective approaches to research of policymakers and social scientists (Wenger 1987). These models hold little in common. While both think research is a "good thing", it is usually for different reasons. For the social scientist the objective is to extend and broaden knowledge; administrators are more pragmatic, influenced by strategic and political considerations. In such circumstances conflict seems inherent in the research process; it is inevitable and not necessarily unhealthy. It is how the conflict is resolved that is crucial.

Tendering

The basis for the decision to invite nine institutions to tender is unclear, as is the reason for the choice of the Centre to undertake the study. The Centre had no track record in research. It had been established in 1970 as a training centre for graduates. The greater part of its activity was directed to providing basic skills for those seeking a career in journalism. There were, however, several factors which seemed to work in its favour. It has close ties with the media industry. As a result the Centre had the confidence of the media other institutions did not. The sensitivity of media practioners to social science research is well known. The relationship between practitioner and researcher in Britain – in comparison with other countries – is particularly unhealthy, characterised by suspicion, acrimony and misunderstanding. There is something approaching a "research phobia", well captured in the polemics of Alan Protheroe, who has written of "a concatenation of caterwauling from so called media critics which bears not the slightest examination if truth, objectivity and accuracy are applied to their so called research". An institution such as the Centre, in contrast to those in the field of "media studies", appears to have more credibility in the eyes of the media.

The Centre made the most of its contacts in the preparation of its proposal. It sounded out the views of some of the main actors in the Select Committee enquiry. It also sought the views of the Ministry. This contrasts with some of the other applicants who did not have the same degree of access. The most significant area concerned the question of control. The millieu of the researcher is dominated by notions of academic freedom; at the heart of the administrator's world is the problem of control. Mechanisms of consultation to monitor the progress of the research were important to the Ministry. The Centre's

proposal tackled this issue directly – as compared with other institutions. It suggested the establishment of an advisory board, consisting of representatives of the Ministry, the research team and the university. The board was to meet on a regular basis and all the negotiations over access and material and so forth were dealt with by this body. Many researchers regard the monitoring of their research as unwarranted, impractical and an intrusion. However in the world of contract research sponsored by government it seems that no department will award a grant without some guarantee of a mechanism to oversee the research (see Wenger 1987). The important questions therefore concern the composition and role of these committees. However the degree of receptiveness of the Centre in this area does seem to have played a part in its securing of the contract.

Access

The research began with the expectation of minimal cooperation from the Ministry. The ingrained secrecy of British government and the sensitivity on matters of national security were seen as obstacles in the way of the study. Many of the principal figures were believed to be ill-disposed to the work. These gloomy anticipations appeared to be confirmed in the first meeting with the men from the Ministry. Access to classified material was denied. Given that something like 95% of documents in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office had been reported as receiving some degree of security classification this posed potential difficulties with a department reputed to be even more security conscious. Answers to many of the queries raised by the research team were evasive. Summaries only of internal Ministry reports would be provided. Confidentiality was stressed. Endless negotiations over access to people and material were to characterise relations with the Ministry for the duration of the project. In these negotiations the Ministry was in a dominant position; ultimately they held the purse strings. But the team found several things working for them. The need to complete the study was, perhaps, the most important. From the Ministry's position this was, above all, a political need. Also significant was the trust built up by the senior researchers.

Not all the pessimism at the outset proved to be justified. The main actors were able and willing to talk with us. The team did in fact interview everyone they asked to interview. The only lack of cooperation came from the media, particularly the tabloid press. This did come as a surprise. Our experience with the media, although there is no space to discuss it in this paper, did, to some extent, bear out the problems other researchers have had in their dealings with British media instutions (for example, Schlesinger 1980; Burns 1977).

The advantages the complexities of government hold for the researcher

soon became apparent. Government is a vast and rambling organisation. Many of the difficulties we encountered in obtaining material were not due to a desire to keep things secret or to obstruct the work. They were often simply a consequence of officials not knowing or not being able to find out. For example, the Ministry of Defence was never able to provide precise figures for the number of people it employed in a public relations capacity. They had difficulties in calculating the numbers. Their PR department – the largest in Whitehall – has a diverse and widely dispersed personnel. Besides those employed in central government, there are men and women in "outstations" scattered throughout the Ministry's global empire. These "outstations" are located at British military and government establishments from Preston to Port Stanley, Hereford to Hong Kong (see Mercer et al. 1987). They include civilian and military, administrative and clerical posts. The Ministry in trying to calculate numbers had a problem of whom to include. For example, are RAF community relations officers part of the PR contingent? After figures were supplied, a PR official telephoned to stress the figures were not totally reliable. They did not know if all the notional posts were filled.

Obtaining material was further handicapped by the rapid turnover of personnel inside the Ministry. During the period of the work the Ministry went through three Ministers, two permanent under secretaries and several senior civil servants, including the sudden and unexpected departure of Clive Ponting.[3] This raised the problem of oversight. For the research team it meant that requests had to be resubmitted on several occasions. Explanations of what we were doing had to be gone through time and again. Delays were inevitable as decisions had to be retaken. There was a lack of consistency in the Ministry's dealings with us. Assistance ebbed and flowed. Requests were sometimes granted the second time around. Persistence in making requests often paid off.

Rapid turnover of personnel was responsible for the lack of institutional memory which appears to characterise government departments. A noticeable example of this occurred during the Select Committee enquiry. Senior civil servants in their evidence to the Committee denied any knowledge of proposals drawn up to deal with media relations in times of emergency. They had to return to the Committee to tell them that such proposals had in fact been drawn up in 1977. No civil servant in the Ministry had remembered their existence.

A more gripping example concerned the lessons of the Suez campaign. Reading through the assessments made of various aspects of that campaign – the relevant documents having been found in the papers of the commander in chief of Operation Musketeer located in the library of the War Studies department of King's College, London – one could not but be struck by the parallels with the Falklands campaign. The Public Relations report referred to the failure to provide adequate facilities for correspondents to get their copy back,

the problems of transporting the press to the battle zone, the overloading of communications facilities, complaints about the quality of PR officers, the lack of briefing opportunities and the last minute accreditation of reporters accompanying the invasion force. On the last point the report notes "reporters being nominated who were not necessarily suitable for the job" and the "haphazard nature of the accreditation process". Exactly the same problem arose with accreditation to go to the Falklands (see Harris 1983). The Suez report even recommends the same solution that was offered to the problem after the Falklands war – that the government should get together with the Newspaper Proprietors Association to draw up a system of accreditation. Ironically the only thing remembered from the Suez operation were the accreditation papers. The ones given to Taskforce correspondents before their departure for the South Atlantic were in English and Arabic.

The Ministry of Defence is not the smooth running machine it would like the outside world to believe. Clive Ponting tells us:

> Whitehall presents a monolithic face to the world. It tries to portray itself as a single, smoothly operating machine where everybody is on the same side, working harmoniously together toward an agreed goal. (Ponting 1986)

Inside the corridors of power the reality is somewhat different. The extent of the divisions within the British state were highlighted by the Falklands war. There were tensions inside government between Mrs Thatcher and her colleagues. This was most apparent in her relations with her Foreign Secretary, Francis Pym. The *Times* was to report a year later that Pym was being "undermined from the top" (see Cockerell et al. 1984). The rivalry between the armed forces was intense, as each Service attempted to gain maximum publicity for its activities. The extent of the rivalry was revealed by the blue pencilled comments of the censors on the copy journalists sent back from the South Atlantic. Remarks such as "isn't my ship in this war?" or "this bugger hasn't mentioned the Navy . . . kill his story . . . that'll teach him a lesson". It was apparent that others in the armed forces leaked material such as these comments to discredit the Navy.

There were also tensions between the politicians and the military. Politicians wanted favourable publicity for their "good news war" while the military wanted to maintain operational security and avoid giving away any information about military blunders. The initial decision not to send any journalist with the Taskforce was overturned on the direct intervention of the Prime Minister. There were examples of information about military operations being released prematurely. For example, the attack on Goose Green was released prior to the action. One can speculate on the motives for this; it certainly helped the government to regain political momentum and infuriated the

military (see Mercer et al. 1987; Harris 1983). Besides these rivalries reference has already been made to the struggles between civil servants and information specialists, between government departments, such as Number Ten and the Ministry of Defence and between personalities inside Whitehall. It is only through these intra group tensions that power is exercised in practice.

The constant jockeying for position and prestige is of benefit for the researcher. Much of the assistance we received, including material sent in unmarked brown paper envelopes, was determined by considerations arising out of these rivalries. If access from one quarter was not forthcoming, often someone else would step in to assist. For example, officials from the Ministry were uneasy about a member of the research team visiting Northern Ireland.[4] The Army, however, encouraged – and eventually facilitated – such a visit. The British Army's approach to media relations had been developed through their experience of the conflict in that region. As the Army had emerged with most credit in handling the media in the Falklands war, they were eager to show how their PR machine operated. Inter service rivalry assisted in facilitating access to Northern Ireland.

Although these rivalries create openings for the researcher, the ability to exploit them depends on a number of other factors. Mungham and Thomas, in their study of the legal profession, note that the ability to exploit these tensions rests on personal and social factors. This was confirmed in our research. It is important the researcher must not become directly involved in these rivalries. He or she must merely try to learn from them. To become too closely identified with one party can close down access to other groups and individuals. The process of distancing is, however, far from straightforward with the powerful. In the environment of secrecy, where access is limited and precarious, contacts and informants have to be cultivated. Trust and confidence is vital in such circumstances. To cultivate trust some degree of empathy, even sympathy, is needed. To be guardedly neutral is not enough.

There is a thin dividing line between building up trust and becoming too closely identified with a particular contact. This is not only a problem for the social scientist. Journalists experience it in their dealings with the powerful. They, perhaps, have more to bargain with, but some nevertheless enter into collusive relationships with powerful sources. Careers have been built on such contacts; for example, that of Chapman Pincher, the former defence correspondent of the *Daily Express* and espionage expert. Pincher has stated that "departments of state, the Defence Ministry in particular have small, but usually effective units specialising in deception operations and I have been associated with some of those, but never for payment" (Pincher 1978, quoted in Mungham and Thomas 1981). He justifies this relationship, as do other journalists, by talking about "getting good stories" or "serving one's country". Since retiring from journalism, Pincher has become the mouthpiece for theo-

ries concerning Soviet disinformation practices in the West, associating himself with groups such as Accuracy in the Media (Pincher 1985). Much of his evidence is based on material from anonymous "MI5 sources" or "confidential sources" or "CIA sources" and the like. It might be thought that it is more difficult for social scientists to enter into such relationships given their commitments to academic freedom and the need to push back the barriers to knowledge and understanding. However, in recent years, some social scientists have been seduced by playing the role of media pundit. To keep up to date and meet the demands and expectations of the media, good relations with official sources are necessary. In such circumstances collusion can occur. Similarly in a study where access is difficult collusive relationships can develop. For practical and human reasons the researcher can become to close to his or her contact.

Information is not usually given freely. There are motives behind informants' actions. Material was given to us with the aim of embarrassing a third party or gaining publicity for views that informants could not express for themselves. The researcher is in a position where he or she is being used or risks being used. There is, therefore, a need to be aware of the informant's motives. To do this it can be of help to build up an insider's knowledge. The painstaking cultivation of a wide cross section of people is necessary to do this; the researcher has to talk to as many people as possible. There are problems in checking the reliability of information, but if the researcher is going to penetrate the closed world of the powerful, knowledge of how this world works, and who stands where, is essential. An overall knowledge of the working of this world is an advantage the researcher has in his or her dealings with informants. Often individuals are ignorant about what is happening elsewhere in their world; it is the researcher who has the overview.

Access requires overt and covert negotiation. The particular problems of these negotiations in Britain were underlined by the comparative dimension of our study. In the United States and Israel, the other two societies we studied, officials in both government and military circles were more open and willing to talk with us. They were also prepared more readily to enter into debate. This served to remind us of the pervasive nature of secrecy in our society and the lack of obligation felt by senior British officials to talk publicly about their work. The differences were brought home to us at the basic level of trying to gain physical access to defence buildings in Britain and America. In Washington you can simply turn up at the Pentagon and from the reception area telephone direct anyone in the building, including the Secretary of Defence. The internal directory for the Pentagon can be bought in Washington shops. By contrast the internal directory for the Ministry of Defence is a restricted document, and to enter the Ministry requires a pass.

In Israel, a society more in the shadow of war, cooperation was generous, enabling access to a wide range of government and military personnel. The

confidence of the Israeli military in dealing with the researcher was in marked contrast to the situation in Britain. The following incident is indicative of this confidence. A member of the research team was telephoned in his hotel room in Tel Aviv from someone speaking from the hotel lobby, who announced, "I heard you were in Isreal, I know of your interests and think you might find some value in talking with me, so I dropped by the hotel in the chance of catching you". The researcher went down to the lobby to find a Brigadier General who had played a leading role in Operation Peace for Galilee. The officer was obviously keen to put his view of events across and spent a considerable time with the researcher. What was significant was the value he attached as a military officer to research of this kind.

Sectional interests and rivalries are part of the world of the powerful in the US and Israel. In Washington we were entertained by representatives of both the Navy and the Army, trying to impress on us their view of the role of their Service in the framing and implementation of information policy. A group of US Army reservists sought to convince us of the need to reintroduce field censorship units which had been disbanded by the Department of Defence in the 1960s. However in both America and Israel we found the researcher is more accepted and social science research is acknowledged as having a role to play in policy making. This is, perhaps, a reflection of the different attitudes to the public's right to know. In all three countries limitations are placed on the free flow of information. National security is seen by all as a legitimate reason to restrict the right to know. But it is only in Britain that outside scrutiny is seen as something distasteful and almost illegitimate. In our interviews with the military and government officials there was little attempt to justify actions in terms of the public. Even journalists talked about a need to keep certain facts from the public. In the US the concept of the public is more highly developed; even the military legitimated their activities by reference to the public. Keeping the researcher at arm's length is a feature of the powerful in Britain.

Research techniques

The interview was the primary research tool used in our study. The problems of using the interview as a method of gathering data have been widely discussed (for example, *American Journal of Sociology* 1956). Interviewing the powerful presents specific problems. There is a problem of confidentiality. Interviews are given "off the record" with the understanding that there will be no direct attribution without the permission of the interviewee. The Ministry of Defence went to great lengths to stress the importance of confidentiality. The ethics of the interviewing process are well understood by social scientists. But in particularly sensitive areas there are further considerations concerning

the protection of data. Dexter refers to the need for academic organisations as a whole to address the steps they should take to protect the confidentiality of data (Dexter 1964). Doubts about the security of data – and concerns were expressed during our study about how the data was stored and who had access to it – can make interviewees more reluctant to talk to researchers. If the possibility of an abuse of confidentiality is thought to exist then interviewees are less likely to say anything that can be conceived as harmful or embarrassing to those to whom they have personal or professional obligations.

The conduct of interviews can also present problems. Dexter found the powerful react against questions that are precise and explicit. "Elite interviewees", he says, "prefer to handle an interview as a conversation and expect those who talk with them to know when a question has been answered implicitly" (Dexter 1964). They are more at ease with an unstructured interview. Our interviewees were familiar with this kind of interview. A questionnaire which we had drawn up to send to the principal figures was put to one side because it was felt it would not be looked on favourably. The powerful are also likely to respond to an interviewer who appears to know about their world. For example, knowledge of military history and regimental customs and traditions was a valuable point of reference in our interviews with members of the armed forces.

Getting the most out of an interview also depends on the perceptions the interviewer and interviewee have of each other. Benney and Hughes in their discussion of the conventions of the interview highlight the importance of the perception of equality between the parties (Benney and Hughes 1956). This is a real problem with the powerful. Establishing equality is not easy.[5] The Ministry of Defence underlined the point by their desire for a senior researcher to carry out the interviews with leading military and political figures. Perception of the status of the interviewer was a problem with some American officials. The importance of equality was highlighted when a junior researcher, as a result of a senior colleague being delayed, had to conduct an interview with a former secretary of the Navy. The perception of a lack of equality between the parties led to an inhibited and guarded exchange. The problem was sometimes resolved by the interviewees apparently considering us as representatives of the British Ministry of Defence.

The powerful are aware of the "rules" of the interview. They are busy people, who give their time voluntarily (nearly all) and in return do not expect to be contradicted or harrassed. Open disagreement is regarded as an abuse of the interview. It is also a high risk strategy. The more profitable approach is to set oneself up as a sympathiser; returning to check information or follow up points is more easily facilitated.[6] In any dealings with the powerful, it can be argued, this is the only approach to adopt. Yet with this approach the problem of group affiliation has to be overcome. This is not a question of the in-

terviewer's actual sympathies but what the interviewee assigns to him or her. In our research some respondents regarded the "social scientist" – or worse the "sociologist" – as hostile and antithetical to their position and viewpoint.

Dependence on the interview is a response to the problems of obtaining material about the powerful from other sources (see Encel 1978). Emphasis on the interview can, however, lead the researcher to overlook published material or fail to explore the possibility of finding unpublished material (Dexter 1964). The Ministry of Defence did not assist, to any great extent, our effort to gather material. For example, there were several internal reviews of PR by the Ministry between 1965 and 1984. These reviews were not made available to a Ministry of Defence commissioned study. Even when we came to hear about them – unofficially, of course – one was provided, one was refused and for the third only the conclusions were supplied. It was only by "digging" that such material was uncovered. Gaps could be filled by talking to the relevant officials. In this sense Bell is right to dedicate his article on "studying up" to Woodward and Bernstein (Bell 1978). The researcher in such a world must take on the attributes of the investigative journalist. Material on Suez and NATO was discovered by the same process. The Suez material was found in private papers lodged in a university Library. Details of NATO information plans were in a specialist defence journal – despite the Ministry refusing us access to them.

Some social scientists are critical of the interview on the grounds that it produces accounts which are self serving and unreliable. This cannot be denied. However, alternative sources of information, if they are accessible, are sometimes no better in this respect. The saga of the Crossman, Castle and Benn diaries is an indication that official records, such as Cabinet minutes, can be as self serving.[7] Official archives are not the remedy to official secrecy that some appear to think they are. In Britain the problem created by "thirty years rule" have seduced researchers into believing this is the case.[8] Ultimately the researcher is entering a world of subjectivity; face to face interviews can help to guide him or her through this world as well as documentary material.

Response to findings

The findings of our research were presented to the Ministry in July, 1985. For the researcher publication is the "lifeblood of academic reputation" (Wenger 1987). The presentation of results, and eventual publication, is determined by a number of factors – for example, concerns about libel, reluctance to jeopardise future research, the Official Secrets Act, agreement between the research team members. The reaction of the sponsors and the people who have cooperated in the study is very important. This was accentuated in our study by the

making of recommendations. The process of "disengagement" presents as many problems as the initial negotiation of access. Not everyone will be happy with the outcome. Some will be hostile to the findings. These are the "hazards" of the research process. To deal with the responses from those concerned the principal researchers on our project made the report the basis of a presentation to senior civilian and military staff at the Ministry. This went some way to adopting Becker's suggestion of "educational programmes" to present findings to those who are the subject of the research and discuss the work with them (Becker 1970). Plans to extend this process by holding seminars for representatives of the media, the military and civil service never materialised.

The question of the policy relevance of research was raised by the response to our work. The proposals of the Cardiff study do not appear to have played a large part in the Ministry's consideration of changes in information policy following the Falkland war. A steering group of representatives from the Foreign Office, the Home Office, the Central Office of Information and the Cabinet Office under the chairmanship of the Ministry of Defence – the group was set up in 1986 to coordinate government information policy – was formally charged with overseeing the response to our proposals as well as the internal government report on censorship.[9] However changes were evolved independently of our work. Some were implemented while our study was being conducted. They were tried out in military exercises involving the media in 1983 and 1984.[10] Members of the team did attend these exercises. The report, however, was marginal in the policy debate.

Rather the Ministry's response could be characterised as one of "damage limitation" or "containment". There were concerns about the problems the study might pose, particularly with the media and Parliament. Before submitting it to the House of Commons library, several deletions and changes were made. The Ministry asked for some of the recommendations to be amended. They were made after consultations with the team; attention is drawn to the changed recommendations in the book. Sensitivity did not permeate the whole department. A senior political figure reacted with a surprising degree of indifference. As he said of the report, "That sounds jolly interesting, can you give me a three page summary?"

Finally there was a curiously muted response from the media; from those whose protestations and pressures had resulted in the study being commisioned in the first place. The media appeared weary of the subject when the report was published. They seemed to have forgotten all the fuss they had kicked up. There was some attention in the pages of the press – mainly from those who had experienced the war at the sharp end – but there was little inclination to take up the matters raised by the study. It almost seemed that the original calls for an enquiry had been more for public consumption rather than

out of a genuine concern about information management – the need to protect the media's reputation for impartiality being central.

A last point should be made about how the report saw the light of day. The Ministry of Defence operates a system of pre-publication censorship. Besides negotiating to get into the Ministry, you have to negotiate to get out. A final series of discussion were necessary in order to publish the work. These related solely to the Falklands part of the book; other people's wars do not raise any concern. Details out from the version presented to the House of Commons were restored to the text. Other deletions and amendments were made. These primarily related to cabinet committees. Not only is the operation of these committees an area of great sensitivity, but so is their naming. We were not allowed to name names.

Conclusion

The objective of the Ministry of Defence in sponsoring the Cardiff research – setting aside political and strategic considerations – was to learn how it could improve its public relations. It wanted to know why things had gone wrong during the Falklands war, and using comparisons with other people's experience, learn how it could be put right for the next crisis. The use of the term "handling" in the Ministry's discussion of information can be read as a euphemism for "controlling" or "managing" the flow of information to the media and the public. For the research team the objective was to increase knowledge and understanding of the factors which determine the flow of information at times of crisis; in other words the relationship between official sources and the media in determining the quality of information that reaches the public. These objectives are not compatible and the "success" or "failure" of the research depends on how this conflict is resolved.

Where powerful interests are involved in sponsoring research, there will be tensions between the researcher and the host organisation. The powerful will attempt to lay down the framework for the research; they will attempt to influence the course and direction of the research. Constraints will exist for the researcher. Yet opportunities will also exist. Social scientists should not neglect these opportunities. Compromises will have to be made in order to study the powerful. In these circumstances the researcher has to act as a true participant observer and document and describe the negotiations that are involved in the data gathering process. Discussion of the process of negotiation is an integral part of the research. This is not easy. Time and the complexity of the study can work against the researcher. Social scientists, like other professionals, are unwilling to record errors and miscalculations. It is inevitable that

mistakes will be made in researching the powerful. But it is essential that researchers go beyond the dissemination of their findings and relate their experience of dealing with the powerful. It is only with such knowledge that others can extend our understanding of the exercise of power.

Acknowledgement

Thanks must be given to Geoff Mungham, Clare Hudson and John Eldridge for their encouragement, patience and comments in the preparation of this paper.

Notes

1. For a flavour of the war of words see J. Cole, "The BBC's War Over Words," *Washington Post* 19 May 1982 and A. Clark, "Bias and the BBC," *Washington Post* 27 May 1982.
2. When the war broke out there was no chief of PR at the Ministry of Defence. The Deputy Head – who is usually an administrative civil servant – took charge of the operation. It was not until late May, three weeks into the fighting that an information specialist took up his place as chief of PR. The civil servant, Mr Ian MacDonald, implemented a whole series of changes in the information practices, including the suspension of off the record briefings for journalists, which caused much consternation in the ranks of the media. Mr MacDonald gave regular on the record statements, and as the official Ministry of Defence spokesman became famous throughout the world.
3. Clive Ponting was a senior civil servant prosecuted by the government for leaking information concerning the sinking of the Argentine carrier, the General Belgrano, to a Labour MP. The Ponting case became a celebrated example of the failure to obtain a prosecution under Section 2 of the notorious Official Secrets Act. Ponting was acquitted on the grounds his actions were in the public interest despite the judge directing the jury that such a defence was not permissible. For a description of the case see C. Ponting, *The Right to Know: The Inside Story of the Belgrano Affair* (London: Sphere Books, 1985). Ponting was the first Ministry official to act as the "minder" of our project.
4. News management in Northern Ireland is too large a topic to be covered in this paper. Trying to cover the area poses particular problems for the researcher given the government's sensitivity on the topic. For a recent discussion of news and information management in N. Ireland see L. Curtis, *Ireland: The Propaganda War* (London: Pluto Press, 1984). These sensitivities were highlighted again in the Gibraltar shootings case and the controversy over Thames Television's "Death on the Rock" programme which was shown on April 28, 1988. Under government pressure Thames conducted an enquiry into the making of this programme which was published as *The Windlesham/Rampton Report on Death on the Rock* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989). For a discussion of news management in the Gibraltar case see D. Miller, *"Whose Truth: The Media and the Gibraltar Killings,"* paper presented to the British Sociological Association Annual Conference, 1989. An account of the media's coverage of the event is to be found in D. Miller, *"Truth on the Rocks"* (Magill, February, 1989).
5. The gender of the interviewer is an important consideration. The world of the powerful is male dominated with strong views about the role of women which creates additional problems for the woman interviewer. However many woman researchers have noted the ability of the

woman interviewer to exploit a situation of inequality within the interview. Male interviewees either through underestimation or trying to impress can be indiscreet and give away more than they would otherwise.

6. It is not possible to return to all the interviewees. For senior figures in the upper echelons of the power structure it is likely that the researcher will have only one opportunity to meet with them. This emphasises the importance of the preparation for and the timing of such interviews.
7. In recent years members of Harold Wilson's Labour Government have published their cabinet diaries – R. Crossman, *Diaries of a Cabinet Minister* (London: Hamish Hamilton and Jonathan Cape, 1975); B. Castle, *The Castle Diaries* (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1980); T. Benn, *Office without Power: Diaries 1968–72* (London: Hutchinson, 1988). These accounts, besides underlining the dangers of depending on politicians' memoirs to understand the workings of the powerful, reveal the unreliability of official documents, such as Cabinet minutes. Crossman described such minutes as a "travesty".
8. Access to government records in Britain is circumscribed by law. Official records are not, in general, to be opened to the public until 30 years after their creation, and even then only under scrutiny by an official committee.
9. Besides the two external studies commissioned by the Ministry of Defence there was an internal study set up under the chairmanship of General Sir Hugh Beach. This group produced a report in December 1983, under the title, *The Protection of Military Information,* HMSO Cmnd. 9112.
10. The two exercises referred to are Operation Eternal Triangle (1983) and Operation Lionheart (1984). See Mercer et al. 1987.

References

Adams, V., *The Media and the Falklands Campaign* (London: MacMillan, 1986).

American Journal of Sociology, special edition *Of Sociology and the Interview,* September 1956, Volume LXII, Number 2.

Bell, C. and S. Encel, *Inside the Whale: Ten Personal Accounts of Social Research* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1978).

Bell, C., "Studying the Locally Powerful," in C. Bell and S. Encel, op cit., 1978.

Becker, H., *Sociological Work: Method and Substance* (London: Allen and Lane, 1970).

Benney, M. and E. Hughes, "Of Sociology and the Interview", editorial, *American Journal of Sociology,* op cit., 1956.

Burns, T., *The BBC: Public Institution, Private World* (London: MacMillan, 1977).

Cockerell, M., P. Hennessy and D. Walker, *Sources Close to the Prime Minister* (London: MacMillan, 1984).

Dexter, L., "The Good Will of Important People: More on the Jeopardy of the Interview" *Public Opinion Quarterly* 1964 (28: 4).

Encel, S., "In Search of Power," in C. Bell and S. Encel, (eds.), op cit., 1978.

Harris, R., *Gotcha! The Media, the Government and the Falklands Campaign* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983).

House of Commons Select Defence Committee, *The Handling of Press and Public Information during the Falkland Campaign* (London: HMSO, Volume HC 17–1/2, 1982).

Lejeune, A., "The War of Words Behind the Fighting," *Daily Mail* June 11, 1982.

McDermott, K., "In and Out of the Game," in G. Clare Wenger, (ed.), *The Research Relationship* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1987).

Mercer, D., G. Mungham and K. Williams, *The Fog of War* (London: Heinemann, 1987).

Mungham, G. and P. Thomas, "Studying Lawyers: Aspects of the Theory, Method and Politics of Social Research, *British Journal of Law and Society* 1981 (8: 1).

Nader, L., "Up the Anthropologist – Perspectives Gained from Studying Up," in D. Hymes, (ed.), *Reinventing Anthropology* (New York: Randon House, 1974).

Pincher, C., *Inside Story* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1978).

Pincher, C., *Secret Offensive* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1985).

Protheroe, A., "Why we Have Lost the Information War," *The Listener* June 3, 1982.

Ponting, C., *Whitehall: Tragedy and Farce* London (Sphere, 1986).

Royal United Services Institute, *Defence and the Mass Media,* Report of proceedings of seminar held on October 13, 1970.

Schlesinger, P., "Between Sociology and Journalism," in H. Christian, (ed.), *The Sociology of the Press and Journalism* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1980).

Wenger, G. Clare (ed.) *The Research Relationship* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1987).