Abstract

In the first half of the 20th century, the British and German military leadership learned to use the mass-media in a new way. In working with the media they found agency in situations where they were deprived of their traditional handles, in short: in crises. This summarizes the main result of this study of the cultural history of military-media-relations in Britain and Germany from ca 1900 to ca 1950. The study takes the viewpoint of the military leadership and examines their perceptions and experiences regarding the media and especially their specific strategies in relation to them. Additionally it takes into account the role played by politicians in what can be described as a triangular relationship. The main focus, though, is on the military interacting with the media.

Starting with the media-relations of the rivalling British and German Navies in the years before the First World War, the study demonstrates the differences in the way the media were perceived – and, as a result, treated – by the two militaries. While officers in Germany tended to see journalists as below them, their British counterparts treated them as equals. This difference, a result of broader perceptions rooted in the national cultures, became more prominent later on, especially from the 1930s onwards.

The study also shows that the institutionalization of mediaspecialists within the military – first undertaken by the German Navy – started a dynamic of expansion. Once established, the institutions developed new fields of work for themselves and inspired similar institutions in other branches of the forces. This in turn contributed to a revolution of military-media-relations during the years of the First World War, thereby turning that conflict into a water-shed, after which every arm of the military had its institutionalized mediaspecialists and thought the media indispensable for the preservation of their reputation and the procurement of necessary resources. The mediaspecialists also helped to preserve some experiences of the Great War and to turn the Second World War into a mediawar from the outset. Corresponding mediastrategies were prepared first and foremost by the German military, which sought to improve its capabilities that had been diminished under the Versailles Treaty. It found agency in using the media to stabilize morale at home, fight for resources within the state apparatus, manipulate foreign relations and deceive the enemy – just as its counterpart in Great Britain did.