

<b>Institution:</b> Glasgow Caledonian University		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 34 - Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Government Involvement in Censorship Revealed: The War Game (1965)		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2000 – 2015		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>  Prof. John Cook	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>  Professor of Media	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b> 2000 - present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2015 – 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>  <p>GCU research revealed the extent of government involvement in the BBC's controversial decision to ban the 1965 nuclear attack film The War Game, debunking the official position, held for 50 years, that it had been an internal decision only. This finding altered the production of the BBC Radio 4 Archive on 4 programme The War Game Files, broadcast in 2015. Based on the research, the production team changed the programme from an anniversary celebration to one about censorship of the film. The programme was initially broadcast to an estimated audience of 253,000 listeners and was met with critical acclaim by radio reviewers and listeners. It continues to impact listeners via the BBC's on-demand streaming service. The research has had wider impact, changing the narrative of how the history of The War Game has been subsequently presented, including by the BBC itself (2019). It also led directly to an event at the Scottish Parliament (2020) in which an invited audience of young people discussed with parliamentarians how they had been changed by exposure to the findings of the GCU research.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>  <p>Peter Watkins (b.1935-) is a film and TV director, widely acclaimed as a pioneer of the 'docudrama' genre. Since 2000, Prof. Cook has been researching and publishing individual peer-reviewed academic outputs on the work of Watkins, having gained access to Watkins' personal files by permission of the director himself.</p> <p>In 2000, Cook first researched and published on the aftermath of the TV banning of The War Game in a co-authored academic journal article. [R1] He documented The War Game's dramatic adverse effects on the career of Peter Watkins in several single-authored peer-reviewed academic journal articles, published in the 2000s, which examined the production of Watkins' subsequent films; partly drawing upon Watkins' own personal files that attested to these adverse effects. [R2, R3] He also contrasted The War Game banning with the success of Watkins' previous film made for the BBC, Culloden (1964), in a 2014 peer-reviewed single-authored US output published to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the latter film. [R4]</p> <p>The major research breakthrough with regard to The War Game came during a 9 month AHRC Personal Fellowship (funded value: £50,351) when Cook gained access from the National Archives to previously classified UK Cabinet office files which directly related to the censorship of the film. The context for understanding the significance of this research is as follows.</p> <p>Made for BBC TV in 1965, The War Game had portrayed the potentially devastating consequences of a nuclear strike on the UK, using powerful dramatised documentary</p>		

techniques. The BBC had refused to transmit the finished film, telling the press and public that it deemed it 'too horrifying' for the medium of broadcasting. After protests, the BBC reluctantly granted a limited cinema release and the film went on to win an Oscar in Hollywood for Best Documentary Feature (1966). Despite the BBC's insistence this had been an 'internal decision only', suspicions had long circulated that the UK Government had been closely involved in the TV banning, following revelations at the time that the BBC had allowed senior government officials to preview the film in September 1965. There was a 50-year controversy around 'Who banned The War Game?' with claim and counterclaim made in the following decades (see, for example, Chapman [2006] versus Wayne [2007] debate in the Journal of Contemporary History), though with no definitive proof on either side.

Through conducting a more systematic search and timeline reconstruction of the jumble of declassified files available in the National Archives together with a more rigorous historical analysis of these than had been attempted hitherto, Cook was able to provide detailed proof for the first time showing that despite official denials at the time, the BBC had indeed collaborated very closely with the UK Government in the decision to ban the film from TV. Previously secret and top secret memos revealed that Government ministers were consulted and involved, including the Prime Minister of the day, Harold Wilson. The resulting research - significant because of its far-reaching consequences concerning the BBC's independence and its relationship to Government - was subsequently published in a widely read peer-reviewed academic journal article. [R5]

It was the above track record and body of research which led to Cook being approached as a leading Watkins expert by the producer of a BBC Radio 4 programme marking the fiftieth anniversary of The War Game in 2015 and which underpin the stated impacts.

### 3. References to the research

- [R1] Cook, J.R. and Murphy, P. (2000), "'After The Bomb Dropped': The Cinema Half-Life of The War Game (1965)", Journal of Popular British Cinema, 3, 129-132.
- [R2] Cook, J.R. (2007), "'The Past is Myself: Peter Watkins' Edvard Munch (1973)", Critical Studies in Television, 2 (1), 2-17. <https://doi.org/10.7227/CST.2.1.3>
- [R3] Cook, J.R. (2008), "'Exile from the Mainstream': Peter Watkins' work for Scandinavian TV in the 1970s", Critical Studies in Television, 3 (1), 76-92. <https://doi.org/10.7227/CST.3.1.7>
- [R4] Cook, J.R. (2014), "'Making the Past Present': Peter Watkins' Culloden (1964)" In Grant, B.K. and Sloniowski, J. (Eds.) Documenting the Documentary ('Revised and Expanded Edition'), Wayne State University Press: Detroit, USA, 217-236.
- [R5] Cook, J.R. (2017), "Who Banned The War Game?: A Fifty-Year Controversy Reassessed", Journal of British Cinema and Television, 14 (1), 39-63. <https://doi.org/10.3366/jbctv.2017.0351>

Note: all of the above are double blind peer-reviewed publications in well-known academic journals or international edited collections.

### 4. Details of the impact

Prof. Cook's research has had an impact on creativity and culture. His work directly changed the content and overall direction of the radio programme, The War Game Files, produced by Bite Media for Radio 4 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Peter Watkins' The War Game documentary film.

Changing Production of The War Game Commemoration Programme

In 2014, the independent production company, Bite Media (which has since become part of Perfectly Normal Productions Ltd.), was commissioned to make a programme in 2015 for BBC Radio 4's Archive on 4 slot, marking the fiftieth anniversary of The War Game film. The producer of the programme approached Prof. Cook, as a leading expert in Watkins' films, with a view to inviting him to contribute his expertise to the programme. Cook then decided to share with him his (then unpublished) research into the previously classified Cabinet Office files. The production team had been researching only in the BBC Archives but the evidence of the Government files completely changed the direction of the programme.

According to the producer: 'The addition of the Cabinet Office files accessed by John Cook gave the programme another dimension. They added tremendous weight to the theory that the BBC and Government colluded at the highest levels to stop the broadcast of an important film, and certainly increased the interest in the programme'. [C1]

As this evidences, the producer recognised the significance of the research and the impact it would have on his programme and upon public understanding of the history of the censorship of The War Game. As a consequence, the decision was taken to recentre the programme completely around Cook's research into the Government files. It was named The War Game Files and announced by the BBC Press Office as an investigation of 'previously secret Cabinet Office files that reveal how the BBC's Director General and Chairman collaborated with Whitehall to ban The War Game film'. [C3]

Presented by the late film director Michael Apted, the finished programme featured a range of well-known interviewees commenting upon and reacting to the new evidence Cook had uncovered from the Government files. Amongst them was the late Sir Christopher Bland, a former Chairman of the BBC (1996-2001), who said he was 'astonished' to see the new evidence. The programme also interviewed Prof. Cook whom it said had 'obtained the previously secret files under a Freedom of Information request'. [C3, C4] In this way, Cook's research into the Cabinet Office files had a clear impact on Bite Media's delivery of professional services to the BBC, completely changing the production focus of the planned fiftieth anniversary Radio 4 programme.

#### Critical Acclaim and Creating a New Understanding

The War Game Files was transmitted on 6 June 2015. The significance of the programme and the new research were recognised and the programme was previewed or reviewed by most of the national UK newspapers. The Sunday Times made it 'Radio Pick of the Day' for that date while the distinguished radio critic, Gillian Reynolds, wrote in her 'Radio: Pick of the Week' in The Daily Telegraph: 'Previously secret Cabinet Office files reveal the pressure put on the BBC at the time from both the Wilson Government and the Civil Service not to transmit [The War Game]... Interviewees include Professor John Cook... [who] ... brought the files to light'. [C5]

The research also generated news stories around the time of first transmission. The Herald newspaper ran a story titled 'Secret Files Reveal BBC Colluded with Whitehall to Ban Its Own Nuclear War Film', interviewing Cook and asking a present-day BBC spokesperson for comment. (The Herald, 30 May 2015; available online)

The War Game Files was one of the programmes selected for BBC Radio 4's Pick of the Week programme: a review of the 'best of BBC Radio' [C6] for that week. According to the producer of The War Game Files, that 'was an indication of the impact within the BBC' [C1] whereby employees within the contemporary BBC, feeling increasingly under pressure from the Cameron Government across a whole range of issues including a request to fund free TV licences for the over-75s, could readily see the significance of the research and the connections between past and present. Reviewing the week's output, the presenter of Pick of the Week, John Waite, stated that 'my favourite documentary of the week was without doubt last night's revelatory Archive on 4: The War Game Files'. He stated its significance was that 'last night something of a smoking gun was produced... when previously secret Cabinet Office files were quoted showing that politicians did have a hand in suppressing the film'. [C6]

Informing and Engaging Radio Audiences

An analysis of social media feeds at the time of broadcast transmission shows the impact of the research upon the Radio 4 listening public. Members of the public tweeted about it in the days immediately following its broadcast. @IanDBlades tweeted (June 6 2015): 'Brilliant #radio4 documentary... Shows like this are worth the licence fee alone'. @Lavergnolle (6 June 2015) described how 'secret files reveal BBC censorship of Peter Watkins' film by Whitehall' while @ewan1792 tweeted (7 June 2015) the programme revealed 'evidence of govt involvement in... [the] decision not to broadcast' the film. [C7]

As a Radio 4 broadcast, the programme had national reach: Radio 4's weekly reach in the second quarter of 2015 was 10.5 million listeners. According to BBC Radio 4's Audience Research Manager, the programme on broadcast was listened to by an estimated 253,000 listeners. [C2] At the same time, the programme continues to be publicly available via on demand streaming. [C4] While the BBC says it does not keep long-term 'backdata' numbers on downloads of pre-June 2018 radio programmes it continues to make available online [C2], that members of the public were still streaming the programme and being impacted by its research contents can be evidenced by the fact that nearly three years after initial broadcast, @SimplyMetric tweeted (2 March 2018): 'The War Game Files: this is to me why The War Game is still the most important film about nuclear war ever made'. [C7]

Changing the Narrative of How the History is Subsequently Presented

The research has had continuing wider impact. It has changed how the history of The War Game has been subsequently presented to the public, including by the BBC itself. In November 2019, amongst a range of 'BBC and the Cold War' archival materials released to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the BBC released a dedicated official web page on The War Game. This formed part of its '100 Voices that Made the BBC' online institutional oral history project (in collaboration with the University of Sussex). Besides a link to the film itself and to the BBC TV nuclear drama Threads (1984), the archival programme link provided on the page is to the 2015 War Game Files Radio 4 programme. The writing and construction of the page show influence of absorption of the research findings first made public by the Radio 4 programme – for example, when it is queried at the close 'whether the film was really banned from within, by the BBC, or from without, by the government'. [C8] Clearly, even in official history releases to the general public, the traditional BBC line of 'internal decision only' could no longer be maintained as wholly credible, post-The War Game Files research.

That the GCU research has been generally accepted as having changed the public narrative can also be evidenced when, in 2020, journalist Sean Delaney tracked down many of the Kent filming locations of The War Game. Reviewing the history of the controversy and how it had always been unclear who exactly banned The War Game from TV in 1965, Delaney's article stated all that changed when 'in 2015, 50 years after it was first banned... John Cook, a professor at Glasgow Caledonian University, obtained previously classified Cabinet Office papers under a Freedom of Information request' and later 'discussed his findings as part of a special BBC Radio 4 programme'. [C9]

Young People, the Scottish Parliament and the Wider Nuclear Issue

In 2019, Prof. Cook, working in collaboration with GCU's Department of Community and Public Engagement, successfully applied for an ESRC Festival of Social Sciences award (funded value: £1000) to organise an outreach event centred around his research and called 'The War Game: Censorship, War and the Media'. Organised to mark the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 2019, The War Game film was first screened and then the GCU research discussed with an audience of invited senior school pupils, some from the most deprived areas of Glasgow and a majority of whom initially were only very vaguely aware both of the history of the Cold War and the fact that nuclear weapons were not just a relic of the Cold War past but still very much present in our world today. The event was so successful that an invitation was then extended by the Scottish MSP Bill Kidd (MSP for Anniesland) for Prof. Cook to accompany a select group of the senior schoolchildren to visit the Scottish Parliament in order

to discuss and share with parliamentarians how the children had been changed by exposure to the GCU research and the issues they saw from it for their futures in contemporary Scotland (home to the UK's nuclear submarine base at Faslane on the Gare Loch). The event was held in February 2020 at the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh as a 'visit and learn' event organised by the Cross-Party Nuclear Group. (<https://www.parliament.scot/visitandlearn/109721.aspx>)

Feedback from both these events showed how much GCU research on The War Game had impacted the school pupils and the MSPs. 89% of the 151 total attendees agreed (40% strongly agreed) that they would use / share things learned at the events, while 86% agreed (46% strongly agreed) that they were now inspired to learn more about this topic. [C10] One of the young people, who attended both the original and the Scottish Parliamentary event, said it 'had had a profound effect on her view around nuclear weapons'. [C10] As a result, she had decided to change what she wanted to do with her life and to study at University. Clearly, GCU research into The War Game had not only changed narratives about how events of the past were presented but in some cases, the future of young people's lives.

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- [C1] Producer of Archive on 4: The War Game Files (1st tx. BBC Radio 4 06.06.15), Bite Media Productions (now part of Perfectly Normal Productions Ltd.). Testimonial letter, 5 July 2020.
- [C2] BBC Audience Research Manager, Radio 4 and Multiplatform and Podcasts. Testimonial letter (email), 8 July 2020.
- [C3] "Programme Information: The War Game Files", BBC Media Centre, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/proginfo/2015/23/the-war-game-files>
- [C4] Archive on 4: The War Game Files (2015), 1st tx. BBC Radio 4, 6 June, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b05xcktx>
- [C5] Reynolds, G. (2015), "Radio: Pick of the Week", The Daily Telegraph (Saturday edition), 6 June, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1686171167/63018B90FFDB466EPQ/6>
- [C6] Pick of the Week (2015), tx. BBC Radio 4, 7 June, <https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/0A182E80?bcast=115789534>
- [C7] Public Tweets: <https://twitter.com/lanDBlades/status/607276028160024577> | <https://twitter.com/Lavergnolle/status/607272749019590657> | <https://twitter.com/ewan1792/status/607646157582532608> | <https://twitter.com/SimplyMetric/status/969518196528222208>
- [C8] 'The War Game', <https://www.bbc.com/historyofthebbc/100-voices/coldwar/war-game>
- [C9] Sean Delaney (2020), 'The War Game: The Controversial Nuke Film set in Kent which won an Oscar but was Banned by the BBC', 3 September, <https://www.kentonline.co.uk/medway/news/why-this-kent-based-movie-was-banned-233116/>
- [C10] 'The War Game: Censorship, War and the Media', GCU Department of Community and Public Engagement (CPE), Case Study Document, supplied courtesy of GCU Department of CPE.