

The Kosovo Crisis and the Media:  
Reflections by a NATO Official

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The Kosovo conflict was to a high degree a war of conscience. Sure, the security of the whole region of South East Europe was at stake, but the humanitarian aspect played a major role in convincing the leaders of the Alliance that military action was unavoidable. It is because in today's conflicts 90% of the casualties are civilians compared with only 5% in the First World War and 48% in the Second, that liberal democracies feel the need to become involved in order to save lives by putting a stop to persecution on grounds of ethnicity or religion. Wars of conscience pose considerable problems for the western democracies vis-à-vis the media. They increasingly expect that the military campaigns themselves should be conducted in a more civilised way. It is also manifest in the media's expectation that the extreme character of the use of force be recognised by liberal democracies and that they try to limit its effects as much as possible.

The media in liberal western democracies expect standards of perfection in the conduct of civilised warfare that reality cannot really match. There is a perception gap between what is feasible and what is desirable and it is

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author alone. They do not represent an official position of NATO.

into that gap that the media pour with the results that we saw on many occasions during Operation Allied Force. This can take several forms particularly in an age where the media, via satellite and cable TV and 24 hours news channels can have the story in real time. The media no longer need spokesmen to present them with the facts. They are fully able to find out those facts themselves and often much faster than spokesmen ever can. 24 hours TV means that every event, every incident can be dissected, analysed and commented upon. After watching a conflict 24 hours a day on TV, even the shortest conflict in human history (78 days) can seem to the average viewer to be lasting an eternity.

The media like conflicts and are attracted to them because they are larger than life events. They generate dramatic pictures that speak for themselves and maximise the appeal to the emotions of viewers. The ability of the media to dramatise events and create a global audience for a conflict puts policy makers under pressure to take decisions faster and with less time for reflection than at any previous time in human history. Humanitarian interventions are more controversial and public opinion – not to mention the press – is less deferential. This is particularly true when the conflict is against another European state at the end of the 20th century. In today's conflicts, political leaders spend as much time explaining or justifying a conflict to their public opinion and to the media as they actually do running them. A senior British defence official complained that he spent most of his time preparing for his daily press briefing and trying to anticipate the difficult questions he would be asked. He had less time to be involved in his primary role of running the conflict as a result.

The media are primarily interested in the instantaneous image which becomes the reality of the day. In other words, they are interested in news and the problem here is that news is often not important or rather because it is news does not mean to say that it is always important. The tragic Djakovica convoy incident in which 10-20 people died became the dominant news story for 5 days. During those 5 days, 200.000 people were expelled from Kosovo. But for 5 days, the dramatic convoy incident was thought to be more newsworthy than these 200.000 people expelled from their homes. The deportation, however was much more intrinsic to the real story of what was going on inside Kosovo. But why did the media not report that? Answer: no pictures. And this is a fundamental lesson that we have to learn. It is quite simple: “no pictures, no news”. In other words, the NATO spokesman used thousands of words every day to explain what was going on. He was talking about atrocities, about executions, about lootings, about house burnings, about rapes. He was talking about identity thefts of people’s documents. None of that was believed because he could not present the photographic evidence. In much of the press it was called rumour and speculation. We didn’t have any pictures and if you can’t provide a picture, there is no story, even though you are describing the fundamental reality of what is going on. But if TV can provide a picture of a tractor unfortunately hit by NATO aircraft by mistake, then that becomes the reality of the war. The individual incident is played up and the general trend is played down. Context suffers. The conflict is portrayed by the media as a series of individual newsworthy incidents, some of which are decisive to the outcome of the conflict, others of which are totally irrelevant. There is little sense of fundamental dynamics, of underlying currents or of probable outcomes. Another development that adds to this problem is the fact that in particular the TV news channels are in strong competition and

have to offer their viewers dramatic and especially new pictures. When the refugee flows into Albania and Macedonia continued for days and the media simultaneously focused on one of NATO's mistakes, Jamie Shea asked a TV editor why they didn't also report on the huge refugee flow. The answer was: "But Jamie, we did refugees last week". Again, context suffered.

It meant that Milosevic, who controlled the pictures, could show the western media the pictures he wanted them to see of NATO's collateral damage and make sure that none of the pictures that would have embarrassed him, the real pictures of war, were never filmed or released because of censorship. It meant that we were dependent on a brave Kosovar Albanian who made a video film of one particular massacre and managed to smuggle it out. When that played on CNN, after about five or six weeks after the beginning of Allied Force, they were the very first pictures that anybody had seen of what was actually happening inside Kosovo. He who controls the ground controls the media war, even though he who controls the air controls the military strategy for winning. One of our key challenges during the Kosovo crisis was to convince journalists that we were not losing the media war while we were in fact winning the military conflict. Milosevic's control of the pictures lent credibility to this – ultimately wrong – perception.

Another problem in dealing with the media in times of crisis is their belief that objectivity requires a debate. If you do not present contradictory views, you are not being objective. However, logically objectivity is not simply criticising your own side all the time. But for the media it is often precisely that. The media have a tendency to believe that every time a NATO spokesman appears there has to be a Yugoslav spokesman on at

the same time. This lends credence to the notion that official views are automatically suspect or, at the minimum partial.

At the end of the day, what is important? The criteria for success are threefold. First of all, have you convinced your own public opinion? The answer is, in Allied Force we did. Our publics were not enthusiastic – who is about a military conflict after all? But they did basically believe that ultimately, despite the problems and the ups and downs, we were justified in doing what we did. Because we told them and we kept on telling them that. And even if the media were not particularly convinced by NATO's operation, we used the media to communicate to the man in the street. He is the person who counts in these types of operations through his support in opinion polls.

Secondly, did we convince our adversary? Clearly we did because the fact is, Milosevic gave in; that is the fact, the bottom line. I would like to think that our media operations had a minor role in bringing him to that.

Thirdly, did we convince the victims, the Kosovar Albanians, to stay the course? We did. When Jamie Shea went to Kosovo in June 1999, a lady told him: "You were our lifeline to optimism". Other people told him that the 3PM NATO press briefing had all convinced them that they should not despair. The well-known Kosovar Albanian journalist, Veton Surroi, told him that he was hiding in a basement with 19 others and every day after the briefing he had to translate every single word he spoke, except for his terrible jokes which he couldn't translate.

Finally, I would like to make some remarks about the difficult relationship between NATO's military campaign and the humanitarian

aspects. It was a key imperative for NATO to achieve maximum results with a minimum of force: the proportionality issue. The problem here is, that once you decide to use force, the pressure has to be decisive. If force is used in a too gentlemanly way, it could convey the opposite impression to an opponent, that is to say of weakness, of lack of resolve, of a definite limit to the amount of force the Alliance is prepared to use. It can therefore even encourage the continuing defiance and resistance of the opponent.

Milosevic showed an unexpected willingness to tolerate a very high degree of damage before being prepared to meet the essential conditions of the international community. The irony here is that to be successful, force has to create disorder in order to cure disorder. The ulcer cannot be removed from the stomach unless the patient is operated upon. Often the situation has to get worse before it gets better. The media seize on this aspect of conflicts. It is easy for them to argue that the decision to intervene has actually made matters worse, for instance in turning a humanitarian crisis into a catastrophe. One of the questions most frequently asked was: "Isn't your cure worse than the disease"? The media are more interested in short term consequences than longer term objectives. The argument that you cannot make an omelette without breaking the eggs is a difficult one to sell. The media want to have it both ways. Before the intervention it focused on the risks of inaction. It accused NATO of making empty threats or of allowing Milosevic to act with impunity. After the intervention had begun, it concentrated instead on the risks of action.

Refugees arriving in a camp in Macedonia or Albania said that NATO was not the cause of their leaving; it was Milosevic's soldiers, and I don't

believe anybody would seriously argue the opposite. But it proved difficult for us to make the case that NATO's action had not made an already bad situation far worse than it might otherwise have been. What policy makers during the Kosovo conflict needed to get across to the media and public opinion at large, was the message that sometimes the situation even for the victims may have to get worse before ultimately it can get better. Doing nothing would not have been to save the lives of the Kosovar Albanians, but rather to abandon them to perhaps a slower, but at the same time equally relentless campaign of persecution and denial of basic human rights. Now, the refugee exodus has been reversed. About 1 million Kosovar Albanian refugees have returned with unprecedented speed. NATO's military action was not only the right thing to do, it was the only thing to do.

Thank you.

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Munich, November 2000