MEDIA & THE WAR IN KOSOVO

COMMUNICATIONS LESSONS FOR NATO, THE MILITARY AND MEDIA

by Alastair Campbell
Press Secretary to the Prime Minister

You don't get many magical moments in this job. On Tuesday, 15 June 1999, I was lucky enough to get two.

I was in Kosovo, a place I had never before visited, but which had occupied most of my waking thoughts, and few sleeping ones too, for months. The press secretary in me was there because I have been working with NATO on media issues arising from the conflict, and General Wesley Clark, Supreme Allied Commander Europe, and our own media savy Chief of Defence Staff, General Sir Charles Guthrie, had asked me to look at the KFOR operation in Kosovo and Macedonia. The administrator in me was there to make sure that the excellent team of UK civil servants we had moved from London, via Brussels, to the Balkans was properly used in supporting KFOR. The journalist in me just wanted to be there as the biggest current event in the world unfolded. And the human being in me was there to celebrate.

And so to magical moment number one: landing at Skopje Airport, boarding a Puma helicopter to head off to General Sir Mike Jackson's HQ, flying low over Kosovo, seeing out of one opened helicopter door Serb forces on their way out, and out of the other refugees emerging from the hills to go to their homes. For weeks, I and my fellow spokesmen in the NATO operation had said the mantra hundreds, thousands of times: Milošević's forces have to get out, our forces have to go in, the refugees must go home. And here, in beautiful weather, over beautiful countryside, the mantra was being sung for real.

TELLING THE STORY

Magical moment number two concerned one of those fellow spokesmen, *the* NATO spokesman, Jamie Shea.

It came as the journalist in me met a young woman, a lawyer. She and her husband had been away when the ethnic cleansers came to the village. They arrived back to find the village deserted, dead, and their home ransacked, but habitable. They were holed up there for several weeks.

She asked what I did. I said I was Tony Blair's spokesman. She recalled his visits to the refugee camps that she had seen on television, the speech he made to the Romanian Parliament, promising long-term help, the time he said in the UK that we must never tire of hearing and telling the refugees' story.

She asked if I knew Jamie Shea. I said I did, and that I worked with him very closely. 'Every day,' she said, 'we waited for three o'clock, when Jamie would come on the TV and say that one day NATO would come to save us, and our friends and family would come home.'

'Jamie Shea,' she added, 'was our daily lifeline to optimism.' It was a wonderful phrase, and for me, after all the commuting to Brussels and Mons, the mind-blowing middle of the night calls about bombs landing on Embassies, the fights with capitals to send media reinforcements, the fights with the media to hear properly the NATO story and the refugees' plight, it was a moment that made everything we'd done worthwhile.

It seems to be a golden rule of communications that people who do a half decent job dealing with the press get a bad press themselves. Some of us are used to it and immunised. I

Based on a speech given to the Institute on 9 July

think that Jamie, a genuinely nice man, was shocked to be on the receiving end of so much snidery and criticism, much of it borne of snobbery, the view that men who talked about war should have accents more at home in Sandhurst than Shoreditch.

But if he does nothing else in his life than being a daily 'lifeline of optimism' to a people on the receiving end of the worst barbarism since the Second World War he'll have done a sight more than the sneer squad.

MODERN MEDIA'S CHANGING DEMANDS

What was so magical about the meeting in Priština was that when we first discussed what we had to do to strengthen NATO's media operation, getting through to opinion in Serbia and Kosovo was one of the priority areas we agreed upon. A small fortune was being spent by the military on leaflet drops and powerful new transmitters to get radio messages through. I've no idea if they worked. But here, in a real person, I had evidence that Jamie got through at the touch of the channel hopper.

This was a modern conflict, and when the analyses of it are done, they will have to look at how the modern media has changed the demands of modern conflict.

The truth is that neither at NATO nor in capitals did we fully factor into our thinking and planning the need for the kind of media operation that was going to be required, though the MoD did far better than most. NATO thought capitals could cope. Capitals just assumed NATO had a communications outfit to deal with the biggest story in the world.

When I saw what the NATO press service was, I was amazed that Jamie was still alive. He was doing his own scripts, fixing his own interviews, attending key meetings, handling every enquiry that came his way, large and small. He was the front man for the whole campaign, yet was expected to do the job without adequate support. No general would go into battle without all the necessary back-up. Nor should Jamie Shea have been expected to. If there is a next time, we must have the media set-up better prepared.

In the 24-hour media age, this matters more than ever. There is more media now, much more. It is more intrusive, more demanding, less trusting of officialdom. It complains about the lack of access and information and then, when we put in the infrastructure to provide it, complains that the spin doctors are meddling in military matters.

But this is not about 'spin'. It is about recognising that in this changed media environment, in a modern conflict, particularly one fought by an Alliance of nations, with different politics, different military systems and different histories, effective communication is not merely a legitimate function; it is an essential one.

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GETTING THE MESSAGE THROUGH

Of course the war was won by military force, diplomatic resolve and skill, but the media back-up was essential too, not least to let the military get on with their (far more important) job. Getting the message through that our cause was just, that our demands were absolute, that we were not going away till they were met, that was about words and pictures, not just bombs and aeroplanes. None of us know for sure why Milošević caved in in the end, but the solidarity of public opinion in the countries of an Alliance he expected to split asunder was without doubt one of the many factors that pushed him.

People talk about morale and think up an image of our forces well-motivated and happy in their work. Just as important are their families, who know that their loved ones are risking life and limb, who know they are well-trained and professional, and who have to hear incessantly about 'blunders', the relatively small number of accidents which dominated a relatively large share of the media.

The morale of the public—public opinion—is vital too. This was a war waged by an Alliance of 19 nations, the loss of any one of which would have been a disaster, real and presentational. And within the Alliance countries, there were coalitions that had to be handled carefully too. *We* had to be just as concerned about the German Green Party Conference as the German Government. Ninety-eight per cent poll ratings against the air strikes in Greece were *our* problem too.

In each of the NATO countries, governments have a duty to govern with consent, to explain to our publics what we are doing and why. Milošević was under no such constraints, and this was an advantage to him, not just in his own state-controlled media, a personal 'Lie Machine,' but in the way it influenced our countries' own media too.

And influence it did. It's inevitable when your movement and access is controlled. When I met them in Kosovo, several reporters who had been operating out of Belgrade admitted as much. Not knowing everything was part of the story.

CRITICISING THE MEDIA

Fighting that Serb 'Lie Machine' was one of the most difficult tasks we faced, and we weren't helped by the fact that the media in our countries didn't think it remotely newsworthy that Tanjug, Milošević's news agency, claimed we dropped napalm bombs on children, or that we bombed old folks' homes. Yet any sign of 'news management' from NATO, even me going there in the first place, and off they went to find a Tory MP to say Tony Blair was more interested in spin than warfare.

In the face of an aggressive media, you sometimes need aggression in return. It may mean journalists getting annoyed when you criticise their reporting. But just as the reporter should be free to report what he wants, so, when those reports may influence public opinion, and we disagree with the analysis, we should have freedom of speech too. In our country, reporters have freedom and that strengthens our democracy. I will defend it every bit as strongly as any journalist, for truth is a strength. But in Belgrade, reporters were not really free, and viewers, listeners and readers should have been more aware of that.

The Serb 'Lie Machine' required us to be aggressive too when the Western media got itself into a mind-set that the only show in town was 'NATO blunders'—this in an air campaign that, Charles Guthrie tells me, history will judge for its precision, and the fact that not one NATO pilot was lost (despite the Tanjug reports to the contrary).

THE MEDIA BATTLE

Dealing with the Serb 'Lie Machine' and the 'blunders' mindset required a degree of co-ordination between capitals not there in the early days. The real problem with the 'convoy incident', for example, was not just that it happened, for people accept that there will be accidents in war, but that different things were said in different parts of the operation, as we speculated and thought aloud before the facts were known. The resulting confusion was damaging.

By the time of the Chinese Embassy bombing, we'd all learned our lesson. Co-ordination was improved. We demanded the facts from the military, got them and stuck to them, while the politicians began to repair the diplomatic damage. As a story, it actually reverberated for several days less than the convoy incident.

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In a conflict like this there is a need for positive co-ordination as well as defensive co-ordination. If there is a positive message to be promoted, it is better done if several capitals do it together. But equally, there is not much point in the Prime Minister making a major Kosovo speech at the same time as the President of the US when only one can be covered live on TV.

Of course the cynics called it keeping NATO on-message. But the clever people—as opposed to the clever-clever people—realised that the media battle mattered. And the clever people included, thankfully, the Prime Minister and the President, George Robertson, Javier Solana, General Clark and General Guthrie.

Winning that media battle required two things. We had to justify the action, show we had right on our side. And the military action had to be seen to be effective.

Justification was fairly easy when night after night refugees were telling their awful stories on TV. But as the Prime Minister said in a speech to the Newspaper Society on 10 May, quoting a TV reporter we met in Macedonia, 'refugee fatigue' quickly set in. So we tried, very hard, to get the media to focus on what we believed, from the limited sources we had, was going on inside Kosovo. There was a real problem here, a media syndrome

more relevant to this conflict than any other before it. Namely: no pictures, no news.

NO PICTURES—NO NEWS

This was another factor that played to Milošević's advantage. If a bomb went astray, the Serb media machine could round up a few chosen journalists at the Hyatt in Belgrade, take them down to the scene, and get the story running. Pictures. Therefore news. Therefore difficult questions to Jamie Shea, Jamie Rubin, Joe Lockhart and me.

And we had only words to hit back with. 'These were accidents. We regret them. Compare and contrast the Serb massacres, the rapes and murders carried out as acts of policy.' Just words though. No pictures. No news. These rapes and murders were *facts*, but it sometimes seemed that unless a reporter was an eye-witness to the atrocity, it could remain no more than a NATO allegation. Consistency of story, non-reporter eyewitnesses, weight of evidence, these were not enough. So what happened was that we made the allegations, backed by refugee and other accounts, which were rebutted by the Serb information centre, as they were interviewed by overworked continuous news presenters.

This is the other big change in today's media: facts do *not* always speak for themselves. What is an interesting 'fact' in the morning gets analysed to death on live TV, and so has to become something different on the evening's bulletins, and in the next day's papers, by a press bored with a 'fact' already subject to so much commentary. And if the media is using fact to build *argument*, rather than speak for itself, then we have to do the same. It's not something that the media are happy about us doing. It is as though facts are safe only in their hands and criticism is their sole preserve.

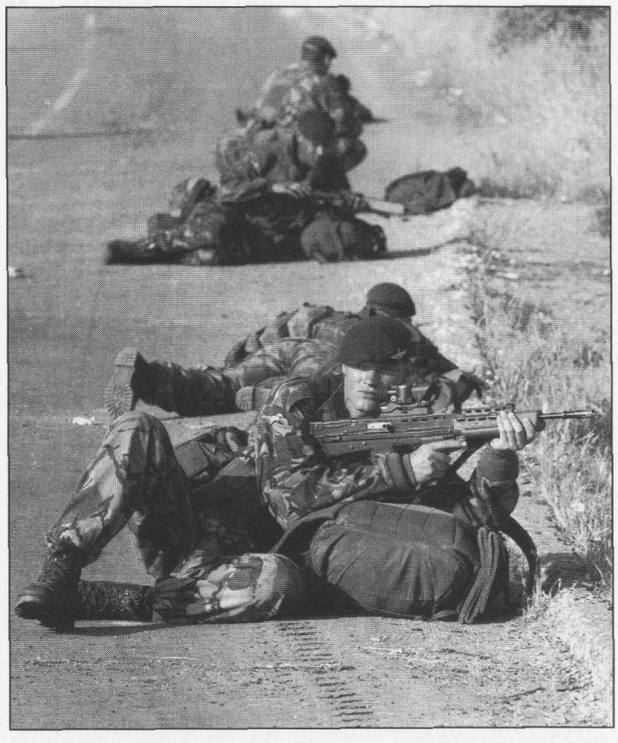
So what we were saying was liable to be attacked as 'NATO propaganda' whereas the Serb day trips to the scene of the NATO crime were treated as the truthful exposé of a flawed air campaign. Equally, some of the TV stations did not like the video link-ups, and other presentational innovations. They saw them as propaganda. But we knew that we had to innovate to keep their attention. It was vital to try to hold the public's interest on our terms.

LEARNING LESSONS

If the media are honest with themselves, they too will try to learn lessons from the conflict, as we and other governments will. I do not believe the media took seriously enough the military significance of the Serb 'Lie Machine,' or that they did enough to expose the way it was being used by Milošević to promote and prolong the conflict through the fanning of ethnic hatred, and hatred of NATO, based upon systematic lies about what NATO was doing. I understand the pressures on journalists who fear being kicked out, but I believe they should be more open and honest about those pressures.

The 'health warnings' of Serb reporting restrictions at times became so weak as to be meaningless, and I know prompted speculation among TV journalists at home that this was driven by those pressures. One US journalist in Belgrade told me that whether they like to admit it or not, there did develop an unhealthy relationship between some Western journalists and Serb spokesmen. The same journalist noted, too, the stark differences between the largely factual-based US print journalism, and the more opinionated, personalised news reporting by British broadsheets. I make no comment upon that, other than to say that this too changed the way that the broadcast media covered the conflict, particularly in the hundreds of hours of two-way conversations between studio and reporter.

It was also striking how few journalists got



British soldiers secure the road after being deployed near the southern Kosovo town of Kacanik, some 30 km north of Yugoslav-Macedonian border on June 12. Reporters witnessed some 200 British paratroopers deployed along the road.

op/Photo by Oleg Popov *Popperfoto/Reuters*

into Kosovo itself, and how few even tried. One who did got there because in our determination to break the no pictures, no news syndrome we helped him to. But he was the only one who asked. The day of the daredevil reporter who refuses to see obstacles to getting to the truth, and seeing it with his or her own eyes, seems to have died. But surely the starvation of pictures, and the denial of access by the Serbs, increased rather than lessened the responsibility of the media to try to find out what was happening there. The fact that there were no pictures was *part* of the story. Of course they didn't want pictures of 1.5 million people driven from their homes, systematic rape and torture. We have since seen why.

Again we tried. The KLA were happy to give guns to the recruits arriving for duty, but it might have been more productive to give some of them TV cameras too. Our efforts to force this pictureless story onto the news agenda as the 'blunders' rolled on reached the stage where we used a 'montage of murder', a Pentagon map showing the major incidents of barbarism inside Kosovo, as a backdrop to the 'refugee fatigue' speech by the Prime Minister to the Newspaper Society. The incidents involved dozens, even hundreds of deaths. They, and the speech, were barely reported. No pictures, no news. Yet a stray bomb that created a hole in a road was news around the world, because the Serbs took the cameras there.

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DUCKING THE QUESTIONS

There should also be some discussion—as I know there was within the BBC—about whether our media should treat as equals, in terms of how they are quizzed and covered, the leaders of an Alliance of democratic governments and the spokesmen of a disgusting murder machine. I didn't feel as strongly as elderly relations of mine, who lived through the Second World War—but I did at times feel, listening to some interviews, that George Robertson and Robin Cook must be the war criminals.

The broadcasters effectively ducked the difficult question of whether they should make a judgement about the relative reliability of NATO and Serb sources, and chose to see the truth as inevitably being somewhere in the middle. It was not. But the result in parts of the media was a moral equivalence between ethnic cleansing and a stray bomb that accidentally killed civilians. And of course the stray bombs also made the story of military effectiveness a harder one to tell, when the only pictures available were from gun camera footage, which quickly became repetitive, or from the Serb 'Lie Machine' bomb damage awaydays.

And a stack of facts about sites hit was considered largely meaningless without pictures or graphics to bring them alive. But just as *we* should be thinking about how to be more imaginative in the telling of that story, so should the media. I hope you won't mind me pointing out, either, that some of the commentators and ex-military who jumped on the back of the Tory calls for a public inquiry (inspired in part by false Serb claims of what was hit) were among those who used to get very irritated when we went out yet again to say we didn't hit much last night because of the weather. So the idea that we exaggerated military effectiveness for propaganda purposes is one that I dispute.

REFLECTING REALITY

As to what we did hit, the media cannot surely dispute that the balance of coverage did not remotely reflect the reality on the ground. We can all recall lead stories about embassies and convoys and hospitals. I can't recall many about successful strikes, which outnumbered accidents and mistakes by a gigantic proportion.

Both on justification and on military effectiveness, recent reporting inside Kosovo—with pictures—shows that the real Kosovo story wasn't blunders. It *was* war crimes and atrocities. It *was* progress towards military victory. What is being discovered now suggests that if anything we underestimated the scale of the barbarism. We certainly did not exaggerate. As the troops and war crimes investigators work their way through Kosovo, I'm ticking off the atrocities in the Newspaper Society 'montage of murder' backdrop, dismissed by one journalist at the time as our 'latest desperate attempt to regain the propaganda initiative from the Serbs.'

Modern communications is about how you get

your message through to *people*, not simply journalists. It means, often, communicating *through* the media, rather than via the media. Many of the commentators, opposed to what we were doing, found fault every step of the way. They still do. But the public saw through their analysis. Indeed, imagine if we had not done what we did, what the public would think now as these atrocities are exposed.

Ask yourself, too, whether the media and our political critics would have had the stomach for an even more dangerous and deadly military campaign, which might have been the only way to reverse the hideous policy of ethnic cleansing, as we were pledged to do. If public opinion had crumbled, as parts of our media and some military-men-turned-commentators would have had it, there is a risk it would have had a direct impact upon the determination with which we pursued our goals. The woman lawyer I met in Kosovo said that their biggest fear came during the furore over the convoy incident, when they thought NATO might bottle out of the bombing.

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THE BATTLE TO KEEP PUBLIC SUPPORT

That NATO could win militarily was never really in doubt. The only battle we might lose was the battle for hearts and minds. The consequence would have been NATO ending the bombing and losing the war. Keeping public support, keeping the Alliance united, and showing Milošević we were united, was what we were all about.

Our enemy, as spokesmen, was Milošević's media machine but our judge and jury was the Western media. Their editorial decisions over which pictures to run, whether to run them, and how prominently, were of considerable influence. And it was not balance, surely, but competition, and common denominator news judgement, that drove the broadcasters to put Milošević's pictures of 'NATO blunders' at the top of their bulletins, and it was our job to try to provide competing stories, pictures and arguments.

The media never adequately understood that for the Serbs, the information war was such a key battlefront. That put a real responsibility on the media to ensure they were not being had. After Iraq and Kosovo, the media needs to reflect whether it has not provided a kind of template to dictatorial regimes in how to use the Western media to their own advantage.

In the end our message did get through. It got through to Milošević, who apparently spent hours watching Western TV. It got through to our own public opinion, which was more robust than much media opinion, and remained largely supportive through the inevitable ups and downs. It got through, obviously to a much lesser extent, to the people of Serbia. It got through to the woman I met in Kosovo, and the fact that Jamie Shea was mobbed when he accompanied Javier Solana and General Clark there, suggests it got through to many more than her.

Jamie was seen, rightly, as a real person talking to real people. They believed him. That's why at the end of the day, as he might say, he was so effective. Through the prism of news as commentary, parts of the media tried to portray him as the out-of-his-depth Cockney boy who had to defend the indefensible, hold the fort as NATO blundered through an air campaign that would never work; as the diplomats cooked up a compromise on the five conditions; as the Greeks and the Italians prepared to flake off; as the German coalition prepared to fall apart; as the US and UK special relationship foundered; as Milošević strengthened his hold on power.

But to the public, he was an honest bloke telling them what he knew, reassuring them that we were doing the right things, and making clear that any refugee tuning in should stay tuned, and stay hopeful. And they did.

In the end, I think we won the media battle during the conflict, and now new and different battlefields open up. But we had our share of luck. There are certainly lessons we can learn, and we should acknowledge that. No doubt the media will want to take a similar look at its own role and learn lessons too. □