
A Narrative Analysis of US Press Coverage of Slobodan Milosevic and the Serbs in Kosovo

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ABSTRACT

■ This article is an exploratory analysis of the linguistic treatment of the Kosovo bombing and related events as reported in the major US media. It studies the national news reported by nine different news media during a one-week period, 22–28 April 1999. This was a period about midway through the NATO bombing activity in Kosovo. ■

Key Words content analysis, discourse, Kosovo, narrative, news, United States

The media portrayal of the 1999 NATO bombing of Kosovo is a good example of how the western press frames stories and events for public consumption. So emotional were the issues presented during this conflict that even the US progressive community was deeply divided in its opinion on the events in Kosovo. The issues were divided between anti-interventionists and 'humanitarian' interventionists (Bird, 1999). On one hand was the concern for large-scale suffering and life loss in the Albanian community, and fear and hatred of the Serb political leader for his role in apparent human rights violations. On the other hand, the war appeared to be another Vietnam, as Americans found equally compelling concerns such as long-term ethnic, religious and nationalist tensions, the potential invasion by wealthy western powers, possibly for global economic purposes, and a battle with rebel forces believed to hold strong ties to organized crime and illicit drug trade. What we study here are the narratives presented by the US media during the Kosovo conflict so that

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we might better understand how such diverse interpretations and images could evolve.

The specific media analysed were: the newspapers *Christian Science Monitor*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times* and *Washington Post*; the news agency Associated Press (AP); and television and cable news channels ABC, CBS, CNN and MSNBC.

The use of both broadcast and print media provided a potential contrast of sorts, for broadcast news in the USA has often been thought to offer much less news volume than its print counterpart.

Research has shown that the press is one of the most influential institutions in society today. Arno comments that media are no longer peripheral players but instead 'the ebb and flow of international conflict is taking on more of the character of social drama and becoming less of a simplified, culturally independent game of strategy' (Arno, 1984: 231).

We also know that marked differences have often been observed in the press, even across elite newspapers, particularly when dealing with issues of national politics and foreign policy (Brown and Vincent, 1995; Chang, 1988; Myers, 1982). Thus, the analysis of these nine media organs seems both appropriate and potentially revealing.

One concept of the news flow process is the so-called agenda-setting function of mass media. Since the early 1970s, McCombs and Shaw (1972) have conducted studies investigating the power of media as it impacts audience members. They argue that while media may not have the power to change what people think, it can indeed influence what people think about and how they prioritize information received. Hence, it is believed that media can call attention to specific people, events and issues simply by providing coverage of specific issues while repressing others. Through extended coverage, media has the power to assign an undue and possibly unwarranted emphasis to certain issues, people and events. McCombs and Shaw (1972) have found strong statistical relationships between the amount of coverage issues receive during political campaigns in newspapers and the ranking of those issues by voters. As Picard (1986: 387) cautions, however, within media portrayal of non-state political violence, these studies have examined the relationship in rhetorical dimensions only. They tend to work at the level of correlation and rarely consider empirical relations. One study (Holden, 1986: 902) found no statistical evidence 'that media coverage was responsible for the stimulating effects'.

Looking at news flow as discourse, Galtung (1996) and Galtung and Vincent (in press) argue that issues are not bipolar: Galtung and Vincent

argue that news discourse does not follow one straight line between two opposite poles. A true understanding of events may rest on intersecting lines and adjacent points representing the problem and discussion points. The US media typically try to reduce the discourse possibilities to just an 'either/or' mentality (also see Herman and Chomsky (1988) for similar conclusions).

Language, ideology and communicative texts

It has been observed that language serves as a legitimizer of events and ideas. Habermas notes that a specific use of language is to effect consensus.

Under the functional aspects of reaching understanding, communicative action serves the transmission and renewal of cultural knowledge; under the aspect of coordinating action, it serves social integration and the establishment of group solidarity; under the aspects of socialization, it serves the formation of personal identities. (Habermas, 1981: xxiv–xxv)

The ability of negative opinions and experiences to serve as a form of social conflict resolution, particularly when other solutions are not available has been observed (van Dijk, 1983: 51). While van Dijk refers to ethnic minority news, he could just as easily refer to other subjects. These stories 'often lack a Resolution . . . and cannot be encountered by effective personal or social action. The story must thus center around a negative Complication category and an important Evaluation category, in which the storyteller expresses personal opinions about the events and the overall negative conclusions that should be drawn' (van Dijk, 1983: 51).

It is also observed that media have the ability to function as an intermediary or arbitrator (Schellenberg, 1982: 236). Facilitation of communication between parties, particularly if the principals cannot or do not wish to contact each other directly is made possible. The adjudicator's power is bolstered by his or her independence and lack of bias (Arno, 1984: 232). This third party position is how media is thought to function when we assume that the press can maintain a high level of objectivity in reporting and analyses.

Disposition and ideology also play an important role in political socialization. Elites formulate and preserve the community power structure by imposing their views on others. Oppositional forces are labeled as deviant (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). This enables those in power to establish themselves in the sociopolitical order. The status quo is preserved (St Clair and Giles, 1980: 27–8). Furthermore, marginalized

voices, when allowed, often appear in only a diffused manner promoting containment and co-optation of peripheral ideals (Ehranhaus, 1993: 88–9).

US journalism and its quest for objectivity

Mainstream US journalism has long held that objective reporting is possible, even though some argue that this is at best a fleeting and misadvised goal. The industry has adhered to the notion that objectivity is not only possible but desired in US journalism for at least the last century. European journalists have not embraced the idea of objectivity in quite the same way.

The concept of objectivity holds that journalists emphasize impartiality void of bias or distortion (Stephens, 1997: 258). Early in America's history skeptics existed regarding the possibility of trying to write unprejudiced reports. In 1779, for example, federalist editor William Cobbett reacted to assertions of impartiality as 'perfect nonsense' (*Porcupine's Gazette*, 1797: 4 March; cited in Stephens, 1997: 259). According to Stephens (1997: 259), today's journalistic biases have just grown subtler. There is a premise of objectivity in reporting in which US journalism is oriented today — a notion rooted within academic journalism programs and practiced throughout the media. US journalists also try to avoid use of value-laden terms. They believe that by providing balance in treatment of opposite opinions they make news reports less biased and more fair. Since space/time rarely allows for full treatment of the range of arguments, they will usually cover no more than two or three points of view — and even then only those most in the mainstream. Sources are normally the politically and economically powerful elements of a community. With the goal of objectivity, the emphasis is on 'responsible' sources for information with attribution of any potentially controversial opinions to those sources. The concept of objectivity, of course, ignores matters of news organization pressures and other political and institutional influences. The attempt to 'balance' is an effort to look beyond rival arguments in the quest for 'truth' (Stephens, 1997: 255–64).

Procedure

The assumption of this study is that ideological and systemic/institutional dispositions affect the rhetoric used by a news medium. Our position is that such language selection is a purposive act, even if engaged

subliminally (Vincent, 1997). Hence specific language and its usage are examined here in an effort to understand the narratives employed. As Barkin and Gurevitch (1987: 5) conclude, the narrative of our language is 'a means of understanding the social world'. This recognizes that humans are story-tellers and as such acknowledges that we might better understand ourselves and our social environment by examining the manner in which we construct our stories. Our ability to interpret the world increases as we master the various narratives and begin to employ them (Vincent et al., 1997).

When conducting our analysis, main news, editorials and op ed pieces were included. Computer-assisted content analysis was employed to survey the large volume of news stories for relevant news, and to help us examine tendencies in language utilization. Each news medium was examined by accessing the Internet page for each newspaper. For broadcast news, only the prime-time (evening) newscast was examined. For CNN, each story with transcriptions was selected. Most CNN programs were available including interview and panel discussion programming.

Computer text analysis was performed using the text retrieval program, Metamorph 3.5 for DOS. The program is designed to perform pattern matching by using pattern matching algorithms. In such a process, specific words and their synonyms are identified and tagged. This method has its advantages since some media may refrain from using certain vocabulary.

A linear free text scan was carried out on all stories in ASCII format for the full test period. All stories on Kosovo were extracted for analysis. From this data set we then excluded all AP stories published in individual newspapers, since AP was one of the news media we were studying separately. We also eliminated all Reuters wire stories. The *Los Angeles Times*, for example, relied heavily on both for coverage. While this may yield a less complete picture of what appeared on the pages of some news organs, it renders a clearer look at the writing actually done within that medium or gathered from more exclusive news services. In fact, many of the media in our study operate their own news services, and these stories would all be included by the parameters set out earlier. The resulting data pool comprised 645 separate stories on Kosovo identified across the eight individual media during the one week (see Table 1).

Stories on the Kosovo conflict were then analysed for occurrence, by sentence, for various linguistic features. These included the treatment of the following rhetorical devices and content: (1) presence of violence, (2) portrayal of Milosevic as a dictator, (3) a discussion of the Serbs as evil, (4)

Table 1 Kosovo stories by US news media

<i>News organization</i>	<i>Number of stories</i>	<i>Number of stories as percentage of volume</i>
ABC	42	7.1
Associated Press	142	15.1
CBS	50	22.4
CNN	176	7.1
<i>Christian Science Monitor</i>	37	18.2
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	68	6.4
MSNBC	45	10.9
<i>New York Times</i>	93	11.6
<i>Washington Post</i>	92	6.3

descriptions of the refugees living in fear, (5) crazy and irrational behavior on behalf of the Serbs and NATO, (6) vicious and calculated acts performed by the Serbs or NATO and (7) occurrence of so-called 'missing' themes such as mention of: (a) events at Rambouillet, (b) events at Racak, (c) the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and criminal activity, (d) the KLA and drug activity, (e) the KLA and terrorist activity, (f) the KLA and smuggling activity and (g) the KLA and forced recruitment efforts.

As a reliability enhancement, all tagged stories and sentences were visually examined by the principal researcher for appropriate fit within the predetermined topic. A number of runs were carried out during coding refinement. In later analysis, each sentence 'hit' was examined directly for accuracy and thematic fit.

Examination of themes

Terrorism

The most telling theme in our media coverage may be the frequency and manner in which the concept of terrorism is used (see Table 2). Besides the terms terror, terrorist and terrorism we also searched for nouns such as renegade, agitator, demagogue, incendiary, rebel, revolutionary; and verbs like hate, mob, object, defy, resist, strike and turn against, among others. Use of such terminology appears to contribute to a story structure that has been designed as 'easier to understand'. The story is then cast in easily recognizable terms as a battle between opposing sides, and the villain is portrayed as a somewhat despicable character willing to impose

Table 2 Use of 'terrorism' in Kosovo stories by US news media

<i>News organization</i>	<i>Number of stories on 'terrorism'</i>	<i>Total number of stories on Kosovo</i>	<i>Percentage</i>		<i>Ratio hits per number of stories on 'terrorism'</i>
			<i>of all Kosovo stories on 'terrorism'</i>	<i>Total number of hits on 'terrorism'</i>	
ABC	14	42	33.3	17	1.2:1
Associated Press	11	142	7.8	13	1.2:1
CBS	4	50	8.0	8	2.0:1
CNN	15	176	8.5	21	1.4:1
<i>Christian Science Monitor</i>	4	37	10.8	5	1.3:1
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	16	68	23.5	22	1.4:1
MSNBC	4	45	8.9	5	1.3:1
<i>New York Times</i>	6	93	6.5	8	1.3:1
<i>Washington Post</i>	11	92	12.0	17	1.5:1

hardship on decent, ordinary folk. The objective seems clear: to eliminate terrorism so the world will again be safe.

Meanwhile, NATO leaders pledged to prevail over Milosevic's reign of terror as they opened the organization's 50th anniversary celebration, rejecting as unsatisfactory an offer from Belgrade to allow some international presence in Kosovo ('NATO Vows to End Serb Terror', CBS, 23 April 1999).

And, in another story we find: "One thing that came through strongly was the absolute terror people felt," Ward said by telephone from Skopje' (Weiner, 1999).

The message is straightforward. A horrendous act of terrorism has occurred. The terrorist is still at large. The use of the concept of terrorism tends to reduce all salient issues to a simple generality. In other words, it takes the many complex social and political issues at hand and frames the conflict as a simple crime against humanity. It therefore redirects the rhetoric. The so-called terrorists are cast as doing more than just inflicting horrors on their neighbors and countrymen and women. They threaten us all. By allowing them to continue, we place the very world order in jeopardy. And, for many audiences, this conjures up images of fairness, underdogs and the oppressed. The fight is thus transformed into a battle for humanity. If allowed to remain it might evolve as an uncontrolled epidemic. Within this context, then, the position of NATO is portrayed as a given. NATO must stop this evil menace. We see such sentiments in the following story from ABC:

. . . into the 21st century . . . NATO, they said in a joint statement, will be 'larger, more capable and more flexible' and will take on new missions such as conflict and crisis prevention, combating the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and halting terrorism. (Morenc, 1999)

Yet, limits are set on what exactly NATO can hope to do. After all, there are so many human abuses in the world, and one must carefully choose which battles require intervention.

As noted earlier, there are the larger moral issues which also may come to bear. This is common in just about any military conflict. What is interesting is how religion is still used today and may be employed by journalists in an effort to define conflicts within larger moral parameters. In one excerpt from a *New York Times* story, the plight of Albanians is placed into this greater milieu:

'I pray that God rewards the people of this village who have shown us a kindness that is beyond words. And I hope God punishes the Serbs and Macedonians for the bad things they do. Such hate they have . . .'

Nazlie Hysku, 67, ached in her shoulders, her legs and especially her heart. 'Is there a God any more for Albanians?' she asked, closing her eyes. (Bearak, 1999)

Overall our analysis found that the ABC, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Washington Post* most used rhetoric that emphasized terrorism. In each of the cases it accounted for over 10 percent of all Kosovo stories they ran. The highest occurrence, by far, was with ABC, where a full one-third of its stories were highlighted by the terrorism theme (see Table 2).

Fear

Another variable examined in this study was how 'fear' was a factor in the presentation of refugees and their stories. The use of terms dwelling on the fear factor holds the potential to heighten the drama and further emphasize the atrocities which occurred in Kosovo.

In a good number of stories we saw footage or accounts of refugee hardship and suffering. One dominant message was that these people were living in, and telling stories of, very frightening conditions and inhumane treatment. From many indicators it seems that the 'fear' experienced by refugees was very real indeed. In no way are we trying to downplay that. We are concerned with a selective media and their tendency to allow certain themes to dominate over others. It is interesting to note that AP and the *Los Angeles Times* had the highest rate

of stories showcasing violence. The *New York Times*, CNN and *Christian Science Monitor* were next highest.

Other stories include testimonials given by Albanian refugees who tell of the systematic rape of Kosovo women. In a 1993 UN analysis of claims that more than 50,000 Muslim women were raped by Serbs in Bosnia, the commission found that it could verify only 2400 victims based on 119 documented cases (Hammond, 1999a). Additionally, BBC correspondent and South Bank University lecturer Hammond notes that a European delegation interviewed only four victims before reporting that 20,000 women had been victimized in 'rape camps' in Bosnia in 1992 (Hammond, 1999a). Furthermore, Hammond observes that even after being told that they had been bombed by NATO, Djakovica convoy survivors remained insistent on blaming Serbs for the attack (Hammond, 1999a). With regional history in mind, then, there is reason to be cautious in handling all Albanian claims until adequate substantiation is possible. This is not the tendency in the reporting we examined, however. And, once stated, later retractions and corrections do not appear to reverse the lasting and dominant impressions made on audiences (Hammond, 1999b).

Serbs as 'evil', Milosevic as 'dictator'

Another image often repeated in our sample was the notion that the Serbs were evil people, or that Milosevic was a vile and hideous individual. Efforts were often made to liken him to Hitler or some other devious and cruel character. On 13 April, for example, President Bill Clinton referred to Milosevic as a 'cynical leader' and 'a belligerent tyrant'. Foreign minister Robin Cook, on the other hand, chose the words 'tyrant Slobodan Milosevic' and his 'sadistic troops' ('The Rape Factory', 1999). Clearly, the rhetoric is highly charged. The technique is known as 'name calling' and is designed to cast oppositional parties in an unfavorable light.

The net effect of such a technique appears to be an effort to provide an image that NATO was dealing with a terribly cruel man who committed the gravest crimes against humanity. By casting Milosevic and his people as unbelievably horrific, their actions become unforgivable for many in the audience. The effect seems to be to generate, knowingly or not, a type of national emotion and support for the elimination of the man and his troops, possibly at any cost. The practice of name calling also tends to encourage audiences to accept the sweeping generalities found in such labels while discouraging them from looking deeper for more

substantive evidence. Of course, substantive discussion of events from multiple viewpoints is generally lacking in the news stories we examined. Hence the need for name calling may become even more necessary if political leaders and news writers are to achieve the desired effect among readers and viewers.

When looking at our data we find the presentation of Milosevic as 'dictator' most often in CBS (10.0 percent), *Christian Science Monitor* (10.8 percent) and MSNBC (13.3 percent). For 'evil' Serbs, MSNBC was again the highest (11.1 percent) followed by *Christian Science Monitor* (8.2 percent), *Washington Post* (6.5 percent), CNN (6.3 percent) and CBS (6.0 percent).

Crazy and irresponsible, vicious and calculated behavior

These themes indicate the level at which judgmental language is used to help paint a general description of the 'enemy' as totally out of control and behaving in an irrational and suspicious manner. Subtle messages may be delivered through use of certain descriptors. As we mentioned earlier, the use of language might prove more slanted and potentially biased. Consider the use of 'a killing' as opposed to 'murder'. The former is much less judgmental than the latter.

For 'vicious and calculated' characters, we searched for words such as brutal, barbaric, callous, criminal, decadent, diabolic, fiendish, hardened, hellish, immoral, impetuous, malicious, perverse, reckless, spiteful, tortuous, unforgiving, unchristian, vengeful, vindictive. For 'crazy and irrational' we looked for terms such as crazy, delirious, demented, demonic, deranged, insane, maniacal, raging, senseless, troubled, wild. Our findings suggest that each concept was used frequently. What occurred, however, was that there was no meaningful way to accurately break out characterizations of NATO from that on the Serbs. While there were some instances where Serbs were quoted using derogatory statements about NATO and US-led atrocities, most of the rhetoric involved NATO and western sources. In addition, most NATO comments were directed negatively toward the Serbs. As a result, in the media we examined, the mention of 'vicious and calculated' as well as 'crazy and irrational' behavior appears to be largely directed toward the Serbs. Taken together, then, both categories, 'Serbs' and 'NATO', can be thought of as essentially reflecting an anti-Serb sentiment, and provide a good indicator of the general negativity found in the US media reports.

Missing themes

Perhaps just as telling as what the press does cover are issues that it does not. Such shortfalls help complete our understanding of how issues are framed. To further explore this issue we searched our sample of stories for that which we call 'missing themes: news topics rarely covered'. Specifically, we searched for mention of: Rambouillet, Racak, the KLA and criminal activity, the KLA and drug or narcotics activity, the KLA and their being labeled as terrorists by parties other than the Serbs, the KLA and smuggling activity, and the KLA and forced recruitment of citizens for its forces (see Table 3).

Rambouillet

Rambouillet was the site of peace talks prior to the start of bombing. An agreement could not be reached with the Serbs although some note that the conditions were so extreme that it would have been quite difficult for the Serbs to ever sign (Transnational Foundation, 1999). Even the KLA was reluctant to accept the Rambouillet articles, but eventually did sign. Because of the importance of this event in helping set the stage for NATO attacks, we were particularly concerned as to whether it was in fact mentioned, and the manner in which it was done.

'I believe when aggression stop, when bombing stop, then it will be very easy to continue political process,' Milosevic said in English in an interview conducted by Ron Hatchett, a military analyst for CBS affiliate KHOU in Houston. But, he said, earlier negotiations in Paris and Rambouillet, France failed because Albanians and Serbs were not allowed to talk directly with one another. He said they were forced to negotiate through the Americans, whom he said have designs on Yugoslavian territory. Milosevic said he had no policy of expelling ethnic Albanians from his country and blamed a flood of refugees from Kosovo on the 'damn bombing', not ethnic cleansing. (ABC News, 1999)

The problem here is that the accounts of Rambouillet are written almost exclusively from a US/NATO point of view. Seth Ackerman points to the irony of coverage of Rambouillet as documents shift in their disposition between late February 1999 and late March 1999 (Ackerman, 1999). He observes that in a 24 February article *New York Times* correspondent Steven Erlanger notes that 'Mr. Milosevic has shown himself at least as reasonable as the ethnic Albanians about a political settlement for Kosovo', and goes on to observe that Milosevic has displayed flexibility on the main point of the nature of an international peacekeeping force. Yet one month later, in a 24 March dispatch, it is

Table 3 Missing themes: news topics rarely covered in Kosovo stories by US news media

<i>News organization</i>	<i>Total number stories on Kosovo</i>	<i>Rambouillet bits</i>	<i>Racak bits</i>	<i>KLA and criminal activity bits</i>	<i>KLA and drug activity bits</i>	<i>KLA and terrorist activity bits</i>	<i>KLA and smuggling bits</i>	<i>KLA and forced recruitment bits</i>
ABC	42	3	0	0	1	2	0	0
AP	142	5	0	0	0	0	0	0
CBS	50	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
CNN	176	12	0	2	0	2	0	0
<i>Christian Science Monitor</i>	37	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	68	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
MSNBC	45	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>New York Times</i>	93	2	0	2	1	0	0	2
<i>Washington Post</i>	92	7	1	5	1	3	2	0

headlined that 'U.S. Negotiators Depart, Frustrated by Milosevic's Hard Line'. Ackerman observes that this creates an opposite impression over Erlanger's earlier report and came at a time when in actuality 'the Yugoslav position had not changed at all'. He also underlines Erlanger's contention that the Serbian parliament rejected 'the idea of allowing foreign troops into Kosovo', making his point by quoting a hawkish member of the Yugoslav parliament in his article, while failing to mention a parliamentary resolution urging agreement on an 'international presence' that very same day. Erlanger is also said to have failed to consider his own dispatch of 23 March, where he reported that the Serbian leadership had reaffirmed its earlier position through a series of parliamentary resolutions. On a more general note, Ackerman comments that the US media community virtually ignored the prospect of compromise raised at Rambouillet, which was rejected by the US in late February. Secretary of state Madeleine Albright placed an 'ultimatum' into the peace plan 'intentionally crafted to provoke a rejection by the Serbs to create a pretext for NATO's bombing' (Ackerman, 1999; *The Nation*, 14 June 1999). Such details were not cited when our media referred to Rambouillet in late April, and essentially supported the party line being espoused by NATO and politicians in Washington and London. It appears that over time only the 'revised interpretation' was retained by the media we examined and any mention of Rambouillet simply notes that the Serbs stubbornly refused to agree to NATO's terms.

Racak

Another theme rarely seen in our media stories involves the mention of Racak. Racak was the village where a massacre was reported to have occurred, and it is felt that this event helped provide major western support in its fight against gross violations of international law. The events were questioned by some journalists, however. Some say they never saw a massacre and the bodies may not have appeared until the following day (Chatelot, 1999; Hazan and Merchet, 1999; AFP, 1999).

Both Rambouillet and Racak represent possibilities to go back and revisit events and to further examine them in historical context. This does not appear to have happened, though, and when either was mentioned at all, stories simply reiterated previous points of view. Such a trend would be seen as potentially restrictive to good dialogue, and lending support to the status quo. A failure to examine narratives developed soon after the

events may be easier, but also demonstrates the US journalist's inability to truly be objective.

The KLA and criminal activity

Also telling is how well US journalists were able to approach topics which potentially placed the Albanian rebels, the KLA, in an unfavorable light. Ties have even been alleged between the KLA and organized crime (Boyes and Wright, 1999). We uncovered very few examples of stories that raised critical questions about KLA financing (*Washington Post*, 1999).

The KLA and drug or narcotics activity

Of comparable journalistic interest is the topic of the KLA's involvement in illegal drug and narcotics trade (Boyes and Wright, 1999; Andresson, 1998; AFP, 1998). According to a *Times* report (24 March 1999), one-half of the KLA's funding comes from its drug proceeds, while a *San Francisco Chronicle* article (5 May 1999) reported that US law enforcement officials saw the KLA as a major force in international organized crime and a major player in moving narcotics into Europe proper ('Action Alert: Time Magazine Ignores KLA Drug Charges', 1999). Despite the availability of such background information, most stories on the KLA simply gloss over the issue.

The KLA as terrorists

We also looked at instances where Serbs were specifically portrayed as terrorists. One example comes from a *Washington Post* story on Jim Saxton (R-N.J.), a little-known Republican who surprised Washington when he traveled to Belgrade in an attempt to win the release of three captured US servicemen.

He said Yugoslav officials linked the Kosovo Liberation Army to terrorist elements in Iran and to suspected terror mastermind Osama bin Laden. Since the KLA consists of civilians, the officials said, fighting the KLA must involve fighting civilians. (Eilperin, 1999)

Yet, as noted already, most of our media portrayals seem to have avoided such portrayals of the KLA. And, when covered as we see here, it is most often shared within an interview where a specific individual can be attributed to the statement. And, corroborating sources appear to be few and far between. As Jim Naureckas argues, US news outlets 'have

focused overwhelmingly' on the crimes of Yugoslavia and Serbian forces against ethnic Albanians while having 'downplayed or ignored' ways that Albanian nationalists have contributed to ethnic tensions (Naureckas, 1999).

The KLA and smuggling activity

Still another accusation leveled against the KLA has dealt with its alleged gun smuggling operations. This was very rarely mentioned.

The KLA and forced recruitment of citizens

Still another charge made against the KLA is that they have long engaged in forced recruitment of Albanians in order to staff their forces. Agence France-Presse, for example, reported intimidation through threats to burn down the houses of those who refused to join (AFP, 9 October 1998). The only mention of such charges that we found, however, appeared in one story found in the *New York Times*:

Young refugees here often voice the fear that they will be grabbed by KLA soldiers and forced to enlist. The spokesmen insisted that all the recruits are volunteers, denying that young men are being picked up off the streets and forced to join. And they denied that the KLA received financial support from drug trafficking or other illegal activities.

'There is no money laundering, no drug money, none at all,' said Sylaj. He said the bulk of the army's funding comes from contributions sent by more than 100,000 Kosovo Albanians living abroad. (DePalma, 1999)

Many of the examples for our 'missing themes' came from one single story within a particular medium that week. Now, obviously, there may have been other stories in these and other news media that we simply did not examine. Even if that is so, the point remains that these themes were found infrequently at best and made up a very small percentage of the total coverage. The abundance of stories containing earlier status quo themes also stands in marked contrast to these stories which appeared so infrequently.

Press freedom

While we would not expect to see abundant discussion in the American press on controls and censorship of US media, we did at least see limited discussion on the topic during the Persian Gulf War. In Kosovo, however, there appear to have been far fewer instances. What is striking is that

even though the discussion of censorship on US reporting was quite limited, one story did surface in our sample regarding censorship in Yugoslavia (see 'No TV', 1999).

All societies experience types of censorship and control. In the US it may be more subtle and often surfaces as institutional controls rather than outright restrictions. By going with this story just as is, the message seems to be a not so subtle reminder that in the USA the media operate under what is considered a 'free press' philosophy. At the moment the press system in Belgrade apparently does not. Missing, though, is a deep examination of each press system, a full examination of the pros and cons of each, or comparison with other national press models that may offer true alternatives to the US approach. On the surface, the story becomes just one more metaphor for how cruel and repressive a society Yugoslavia really is right now, and why it is that the US and NATO must continue its campaign until they can declare the war won and Milosevic defeated. Justification, then, appears to be the central purpose of this story.

Criticism of NATO and US involvement

One final indicator that we discuss is how a national press chooses to frame events through stories where reporters look specifically for opposing viewpoints and sentiments. Perhaps still sensitive to the sentiments raised during the Vietnam era, a few of our stories did raise some questions and provided some space for counter-views. In one such case, the reporter actually went to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC to solicit opinions (MSNBC, 1999b).

In another we find a critique where one journalist laments the many contradictions and overtly optimistic information being shared in press briefings (Broder, 1999).

The problem is that these admirable attempts were few and far between. This and other stories were also short on employing a diversity of sources, the variety one might get if intellectuals were sought out to possibly offer very different commentary than the status quo sources often share.

Also found in our war coverage were some criticisms of Clinton's decision to stage air attacks and the resulting long-term implications. Because this gets into domestic policy and has the potential to place Republicans against Democrats, these stories tend to get more attention. As mentioned earlier, though, only the techniques of war may be debated, not the question of motives.

Finally, when military attacks resulted in casualties, the Serbs would typically be held at fault for their barbarous acts. When NATO was responsible for killings, though, the press supported NATO efforts to rationalize and justify the events. Often it is presented as an accident. This included references to specific events where Serb citizens were killed by NATO bombings to the more general condoning of increased bombing missions which placed the Serb and Albanian populations at greater risk due to collateral damage. Quite telling is Anthony Lewis's comment in the *New York Times* on 29 May:

NATO air attacks have killed Serbian civilians. That is regrettable. But it is a price that must be paid when a nation falls behind a criminal leader. (Lewis, 1999)

Non-existent was press coverage that raised questions about the ethics of NATO activities or sought to compare NATO-committed atrocities as they related to those charged against the Serbs.

Altogether the occurrence of specific 'missing themes' appears to have varied from category to category. CNN was high on Rambouillet (12 hits) and also had discussions of KLA criminal activity (2) and KLA terrorism (2). The *Washington Post* was next in occurrences on Rambouillet mentions (7 hits), and also referenced Racak (1), KLA criminal activity (5), drug activity (1), terrorism (3) and smuggling (2). The *Los Angeles Times* was the only other source for mention of Racak within our sample, while ABC and the *New York Times* were the only other media that mentioned KLA drug activities. ABC also mentioned KLA terrorist activity twice.

Taken as a whole, the general absence of all of the missing themes across most of the media suggests that reporting was at best selective and one-sided. The fact that many of these themes were covered so sparingly suggests that the US media did not regularly delve into topics that might challenge the status quo or seriously question its platform.

Conclusions

The rhetorical emphases we found were by and large not surprising. For many US media, the use of 'official' viewpoints is quite common. This appears to fit within the journalistic goal of providing stories through a so-called 'non-biased' and 'objective' format. The difficulty, though, is that such views are typically spun from a pro-US and pro-western point of view with heavy reliance on government and military officials from those countries — in other words, from 'authorities' to whom the press has best access. Any effort to provide counter-viewpoints by Serbian

officials, including Mr Milosevic, is found much less often. In addition, within the context of all the stories disseminated by the various news media, Serb forces would be immediately discredited within any given story they appeared in by sheer contrast to the volume of adjacent stories which cast the Serbs in a very unfavorable light. Additionally, while the media portrayed killings by the Serbs as unacceptable, any killings caused by NATO were justified.

We are not suggesting, of course, that a widespread tragedy did not take place in Kosovo. What we are saying is that accountability goes in both directions, and while there is evidence that Serbs committed atrocities, so too did NATO. The response by the Serbs was quite predictable once NATO bombing had begun. Additionally, there is evidence to suggest that NATO and the US may have actually been looking for a rationale to begin the bombing, despite the obvious risks such a policy posed for the safety of the Albanian population it purportedly wished to protect (indirectly through aggravation of the conflict; directly as victims of NATO bombs). And, at times the crisis was unquestionably framed by the US press as a case where the end justified the means. In addition, by not reporting or underreporting accusations against one side while reporting them enthusiastically on the other, the quest for a 'balanced and fair' journalism remains unpursued. More balanced reports could have easily been written by seeking responsible sources who might offer alternative theories and scenarios. This was rarely done. Instead the media examined gave heavy emphasis to elite western sources, often current or former government and military leaders. When they reported atrocities, these were supported by Albanian refugees who may have had questionable motives, and by elites who were advocating a particular national/political agenda.

Conversely, we found little discussion of potential human rights violations against Serb civilians. When it was done it was often summarily excused or rationalized by noting that it would never have occurred had the Serbs not started its ethnic cleansing campaign. A further reason given was the Serb failure to accept the 'reasonable' peace proposals set forth in Rambouillet. In fact, it appears quite likely that events at Rambouillet were manipulated by the US and NATO in such a fashion that the peace agreement would never be accepted by the Serbs. With an unacceptable proposal on the table, large-scale last-minute documentation changes by the US and NATO and the eventual (but reluctant) agreement by KLA representatives to sign the agreement, the stage was set to begin NATO attacks on the Serbs.

One reason our newspapers scored generally higher on many rhetorical levels than the broadcast media may be a result of the generally lower number of stories aired on television overall. Air time is severely limited and, consequently, each story fits a more selected and pre-determined purpose, limiting the opportunity for certain themes. MSNBC's frequent use of stories on 'evil' Serbs (11.1 percent) and Milosevic as 'dictator' (13.3 percent) does suggest a greater reliance on public officials who normally helped put the official spin on MSNBC-presented narratives despite a smaller pool of stories overall. However, marked differences occurred across the various press outlets. This is reflected in the types of stories offered and the manner in which they are written.

The differences across media also reflect the marketing perspectives and geographic orientations of each medium. For example, AP is the wire service used heavily by newspapers and electronic media across the country. This means it serves most local markets. Given the differences of political leanings from community to community, AP is said to place high emphasis on 'objectivity' in its reporting. From an American perspective, one of the best ways to help preserve this quality is to rely heavily on official spokespeople when covering events. This also seems to give the illusion that objectivity is present. The official US government position consequently appears to be effectively perpetuated through AP. Likewise, the *Washington Post* apparently has much greater access to opinion leaders within 'the beltway' of Washington, DC. The *Washington Post* has also been said historically to report more favorably on Democratic Party administrations (Clinton, Carter) than Republican (Bush, Reagan). The *Christian Science Monitor*, on the other hand, had the highest human interest emphasis of the media we examined. The *Christian Science Monitor* often features stories with higher levels of personalizations, and its religious affiliation (Christian Scientists) undoubtedly provides a stronger moral and Christian orientation. The results were that we often found very high thematic indicators, particularly those themes such as 'evil' Serbs (8.2 percent), 'vicious and calculated behavior' (24.3 and 94.6 percent) and Milosevic as 'dictator' (10.8 percent) in the *Christian Science Monitor* stories examined.

Along with the trend to place heavy emphasis on official quotes, it is worth noting that the US media rarely extends this rule to the inclusion of the intellectual community. The intelligentsia may be much less predictable in their responses and less likely to frame responses in short, simple phrases suitable for a quick newspaper lead or broadcast soundbite. A current or former government official or military leader (like

retired Marine Corps general Richard Neal, used heavily by CNN) seemingly provides a more predictable response and would likely fit better into preset narratives schemata. Occasionally, the US media will interview a representative from an establishment or status quo think tank, but this too appears to be employed with caution. And, when 'suitable' spokespersons are found, they tend to be used frequently by the various media instead of attempting to broaden the discourse through selection of alternative voices. It has been argued by Herman and Chomsky (1988) as well as Galtung and Vincent (in press) that the US media reduce issues covered to simplistic bipolar variables. This is reinforced by industry standards to restrict stories to only two or three viewpoints, as noted earlier. Given such trends, alternative voices are not normally sought through standard US journalistic practices. Yet the use of authors, academics, alternative press representatives, grassroots organization spokespersons — NGOs, etc. — would potentially provide alternative viewpoints. The absence of alternatives seems to have played its role in limiting US media discourse during the Kosovo coverage.

Summary

In summary, we found that the Kosovo coverage was limited and often peppered with potential bias. For many US media, the use of 'official' viewpoints appears preferred over alternative sources, helping to fulfill a certain formula that contributes to potential bias within stories. Such views typically are spun from a pro-US and pro-western point of view with heavy reliance on government and military officials from western countries, thus spawning a distorted view of events. Some themes are covered heavily, while others appear not at all. Finally, while some differences were indeed found across the media we studied, general observations appear to apply to all the US media examined in this study.

Concerns surrounding the NWICO debates in UNESCO several years ago dealt, in part, with issues of news flow. A dominant view was that news information channels were dominated by the West and consequently carried news and information which was potentially biased toward western ideologies. The US journalism community worked aggressively to counter these accusations. Many articles, editorials and op ed pieces appeared in the elite US press and took issue with the notion that American journalists might not be best prepared to adequately report news from many parts of the world. The debate is obviously still relevant, and, as this study helps demonstrate, the belief that the US press

has the ability to offer an objective and unbiased report may be a myth of the profession. Instead, the US media demonstrated that it was quite vulnerable to serving as an organ of political propaganda and putting national interests over the higher quest for truth and objectivity. It is our hope that the US media can learn from this lesson and begin to explore ways to broaden its discourse and better serve its public. The US media model has long been considered a cornerstone of a democratic society. In order to truly foster a democratic society, though, the press must offer an unbridled forum for the exchange of ideas. To do so the US press must address the limitations brought on by its myopic belief that objectivity is possible, particularly when giving attention to a maximum of two or three positions using questionable information sources. Of further concern is the reality that news institutions are not immune from the politics on which they are charged to report.

Appendix: Media items included in the study

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- Eilperin, Juliet (1999) 'House Member Urges NATO to Halt Strikes Saxton of N.J. Back From Trip to Belgrade', *Washington Post* 23 April: A30.
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- MSNBC (1999a) available at c:\albania\msnbc99\ms260812.txt
- MSNBC (1999b) 20 April 1999.
- 'NATO Vows to End Serb Terror' (1999) CBS, 23 April.
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Note

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