

Rules of Engagement: television journalism and NATO'S "faith in bombing" during the Kosovo crisis, 1999*

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ABSTRACT *Every war from Crimea to Kosovo has been followed by a post-mortem into the failure of journalism to cover the conflict truthfully and courageously. William Howard Russell, Richard Harding Davis, and most recently Phillip Knightley have in their turn pronounced the profession dead. But these are subjective judgements and while they have some truth they are not always grounded in actual analysis of the evidence. This article looks at British and American television news reporting of NATO's bombing campaign in Serbia and Kosovo. It argues that the quiescent attitude of the NATO media pool in Brussels was not reflected across all sections of the news media and that the presentation of NATO material on news bulletins was in many cases treated with the scepticism expected of the profession. The analysis is based on a sample of British and American television news from 12 to 19 April 1999, and on interviews with a number of journalists present at the briefings and with NATO press secretary, Jamie Shea.*

KEY WORDS: *Journalism, News, War, Kosovo, Serbia, NATO*

One of the most enduring myths in the recent history of war reporting is the "Vietnam syndrome", the widespread belief that the mainstream US media were opposed to the Vietnam War and openly hostile to the US military and its South Vietnamese clients; and that as a result of their critical coverage they lost the war for the US. None of this bears any relation to the media's actual coverage of the war, yet it has shaped and influenced political and military control of the media in subsequent conflicts from the Falklands War to the US invasions of Grenada and Panama and in the Gulf War in 1991 (see, for example, Hallin, 1986; MacArthur, 1992; Williams, 1993). The media's coverage of the Gulf War was lamentable, defined as it was by their willingness to accede to the restrictive pooling system and to devour everything they were given at briefings

without protest or criticism. Their abject apologies and self-flagellation after the war were of little account. The harm was done.¹ A delighted Pentagon spokesman Pete Williams hailed the Gulf War coverage as "the best yet" (Boot, 1991, p. 24).

There have been a few opportunities since for journalists to get it right. In December 1998, as Bill Clinton faced impeachment proceedings on Capitol Hill, the US military launched its most sustained and public bombing of Baghdad after years of low-level, unreported raids on the country. During what they called "Operation Desert Fox" most sections of the British and American news media regurgitated the propaganda material ladled out at the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and Pentagon media briefings. But there were one or two examples of prime-time television journalists who asked some real questions of this material and recognised it for what it was. They understood that Pentagon and Ministry of Defence briefings played the

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same role as Iraqi briefings: selecting only the most convenient facts and material to get a particular version of events across to the media. After one such MoD briefing, BBC reporter Ben Brown noted that

At briefings like this, the press is only shown what the military select and this is part of a propaganda war, aimed at countering Iraqi claims that allied air strikes have caused civilian casualties. Today's video display ... is reminiscent of the Gulf war over seven years ago; now as then it is a somewhat sanitised view of an armed bombardment in which no one is seen to die. (BBC1, 21:00, 18 December 1998)

Julian Rushe on *Channel Four News* remarked on how "carefully selected images of clinical warfare are seductive" but should not distract us from "what we are *not* being shown or told":

We weren't told this morning if any ... planes were inside the hangar when it was hit. We weren't told how many bombs missed their targets but we know they sometimes do. We weren't told what the long-term strategy actually is and we still haven't been told the definition of the jargon of this war. "Degrade and diminish" means what exactly? (19:00, 18 December 1998)

On the face of it, a sceptical approach to the official source would seem to be an elementary principle in journalism but these were exceptional moments. In general, the reporting of the bombing of Iraq in December 1998 did not depart too far from the abysmal record witnessed in the Gulf War in 1991. Journalists were still susceptible to briefing materials and their acceptance of NATO information and material was automatic rather than conditional (McLaughlin, 2002). On the other hand, NATO's bombing of Serbia, just months later, in 1999, provides us with a contrasting case study of how journalists might respond to military public relations, that is NATO's attempts to put a spin on various blunders that caused "deaths from among the very population the war was designed to save" (Channel Four News, 14 April 1999). The analysis that follows is based on a sample of British and American television news from 12 to 19 April 1999 and on the author's interviews with a number of journalists present at the briefings

and with the NATO press secretary, Jamie Shea.²

The Bombing of Serbia, 1999

Jake Lynch reported from the NATO briefings in Brussels for Sky News and argues that, in the main, "journalists were prepared to accept the fundamental framing of the conflict which NATO was conveying, namely that this was all the fault of Slobodan Milosevic for being unreasonable ... and that therefore the only way of resolving it was to coerce the Serbs into backing down. That ... was internalised, unexamined, by journalists despite the unease, criticism and anger on the part of many of them at the texture of the NATO contact with us".³ That is a crucial point but it would be wrong to dismiss as irrelevant the resistance of some journalists to NATO spin control. It would be wrong also to see the NATO media pool as entirely determining a story's presentation on the news.

NATO planes committed up to 13 "blunders" in the course of the bombing campaign on Serbia and Kosovo: these were "accidental" bombing of civilians, or, in the honeyed words of Jamie Shea, "bombs dropped in good faith". They included a Serbian train on 12 April and a convoy of Kosovar-Albanian refugees heading out of Kosovo to Albania just two days later, on 14 April. NATO's unconvincing presentation of most of these blunders, particularly the refugee convoy incident, opened up an information vacuum and offered spaces in prime-time television news where, away from the infectious atmosphere of the briefing rooms, some journalists could ask awkward questions about what they were being told.

On 12 April 1999, NATO bombers hit a civilian train as it crossed a bridge, killing nine passengers. Just two days later, on 14 April, NATO planes hit two Albanian refugee convoys in two locations near the Kosovar town of Djackovice as they headed southwest to the Albanian border. Up to 70 refugees were reported dead in the aftermath of what were horrific attacks. Their lethal character—the sophistication and relative accuracy of the weapons used—pointed to NATO but the

organisation in Brussels denied involvement right up until the last moment when the evidence could no longer be denied. Indeed, in both tragedies there was an acute awareness among many journalists of the high propaganda stakes involved. NATO's attempt to explain the attack on the civilian train was seen as a defeat in the propaganda battle. An Independent Television News (ITN) correspondent remarked that "There is no doubt that this attack has handed the Serbs a propaganda weapon" (ITN, 23:00, 12 April 1999). And in a dispatch from Belgrade that drew flak direct from 10 Downing Street, the BBC World Affairs Editor, John Simpson, pointed out that "This isn't just a military conflict; it's a propaganda one as well and in Yugoslavia, NATO isn't winning the propaganda war" (BBC1, 21:00, 12 April 1999). For all that, however, the media response was relatively muted; TV news headlines that evening generally reproduced NATO's bullish "faith in bombing":

NATO reaffirms its faith in bombing and admits bombers may have struck a passenger train, killing nine. (Channel Four News, 19:00)

NATO's put its faith in a bigger and longer bombing campaign against the Serbs but it's admitted hitting a train by mistake reportedly killing at least seven passengers. (BBC1, 21:00)

One reason for the low-key response may have been that the train and its passengers were Serb and that this was not going to make an impact on Western public opinion. In a discussion of the incident on *Newsnight*, Mark Urban noted that "it's also being realised by NATO commanders that civilian casualties on the Serb side, which at first they were very afraid of, are not a factor to be worried about ... *there hasn't been public uproar* in NATO countries and I think to some extent *that will embolden them to hit more targets like those bridges*" (BBC2, 12 April 1999; emphasis added). In January 2000, NATO admitted that the cockpit video of the train crossing the bridge at the moment of impact had been speeded up on replay at the original NATO briefing. This was significant given NATO's defence at the time that the pilot had no time to abort the attack when he saw the train approach the bridge.

Had the video been manipulated in service of this defence? Jamie Shea says it was "a cock-up" rather than conspiracy: "There was no manipulation there." The video had been speeded up to facilitate immediate bomb damage assessment and this was not picked up when it subsequently was made available for the media briefing. Shea investigated the matter when it came to light and had it checked out to see if at normal speed the tape undermined NATO's defence. "In fact it doesn't change it," he says. "The slowed down video does not show the train appear upon the bridge before the pilot released his munitions ... it was not a case of a deliberate attack on that particular train on the bridge."⁴

NATO was able to neutralise negative coverage of the train incident because they presented a plausible explanation that journalists were happy to accept without further question. But the bombing of the two refugee convoys was a different story. Conservative estimates put the death toll at 70 people but nothing could detract from the horror of the attack and the images coming back to Western publics via the news media. NATO took nearly a week to provide a detailed plausible account of what happened and in that time struggled to put its version across in a clear and credible manner. Even Alistair Campbell admitted as much himself in a speech to the Royal United Services Institute in London (7 July 1999). "The real problem," he said "[was] 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" (Campbell, 1999, p. 33). There were too many different sources offering differing versions of the incident at different times. NATO in Brussels was contradicted by the Pentagon in the USA, which was in turn contradicted by the British Foreign Office or Ministry of Defence. This created an information vacuum, a space in which journalists began to ask critical questions of the official version.

Contrary to my original expectations, overall news presentation of the incident was sceptical and at times even critical, much more so than it had been with respect to the train incident two days earlier. Breaking news headlines were

open-minded as to what exactly happened and who was really responsible: in other words they did not automatically accept NATO claims or denials at face value. BBC1 led with "Serbs blame NATO. NATO says the planes attacked a military target." The news anchor introduced the lead item on the story in the same open-minded vein but described the incident in the strongest terms: "A column of refugees has been massacred in Kosovo ... Nick Witchel on the massacre and *who may be to blame*" (BBC1 21:00; emphasis added). ITN reported the competing claims from NATO and the Serbs and asked, "Who do we believe?" (22:00), while Channel Four News asked, "Have NATO bombs killed Kosovan refugees by mistake? Serbia and some refugees say they have" (19:00). In America, CNN opened with "A scene of death and devastation in Yugoslavia. Was it the work of NATO or the Serbs?" (17:00), while NBC stated, "The terrible price of war: did NATO make another tragic mistake?" (17:30).

The British and American news media were well aware of the terrible irony of "deaths from among the very population the war was designed to save" (Channel Four News, 14 April 1999). For *Newsnight*, the stark fact remained that "NATO pilots dropped bombs: dozens of refugees they were supposed to be protecting were killed" (14 April 1999). An ITN correspondent reported "the one inescapable fact ... that these people have been subjected to an attack as foul as anything experienced by the Kosovan people in this conflict" (18:30, 15 April 1999).

Awareness of the propaganda war was more acute than it was in response to the bombing of the train:

Claim and counterclaim as dozens of refugees die in attack. (ITN, 22:00, 14 April 1999)

NATO and the Serbs blame each other for civilian deaths in Kosovo. (CNN, 17:00, 14 April 1999)

We are in the maelstrom of a propaganda war. (Channel Four News, 19:00, 14 April 1999)

A battle partly for public opinion. (BBC1, 18:00, 15 April 1999)

A war of claims and counter claims. (ITN, 13:00, 15 April 1999)

There were also some extended references to the propaganda war. *Newsnight* led with the proposition that "This is *either* one of the most cruelly effective pieces of war propaganda in recent years [on the part of the Serbs] *or* NATO has made a terrible mistake." The news presenter remarked that "If NATO's political leaders thought they could fight a war without any casualties they were brutally disabused today" and asked the Defence Secretary, George Robinson, "whether the whole campaign isn't now more concerned with saving NATO's face than anything else". This followed a feature item on a propaganda war in which "our leaders ... bombard us daily with words, demonising Milosevic like hellfire preachers" (BBC2, 14 April 1999). BBC1's lunchtime bulletin the next day featured an extended discussion on the issue in which the news anchor put it to his guests that "'Propaganda' is not a word we like but you could argue that actually that's what public affairs officers for NATO *should be* engaged in; it's a weapon of war" (13:00, 15 April 1999; emphasis added). Channel Four News asked, "Is Milosevic winning the propaganda war?" and opened a detailed news item with the remark that "both the alliance and Yugoslavia's treatment of the news of the tragedy has emphasised just how important propaganda is in war" (15 April 1999).

Claim and Counterclaim: the media assess the evidence

The initial official reaction to the incident from NATO in Brussels and from the Pentagon was that the Serbs did it. How would journalists react to that? Would they accept the official line at face value until proven otherwise? Or would they handle it with as much caution as Serb claims? The BBC's Defence Correspondent in Brussels, Mark Laity, came under fire from critics for his passive response to NATO claims. In one of his first assessments of the convoy tragedy (21:00, 14 April 1999) he simply reported the NATO line without apparent awareness of its inherent leakiness. While the news presenter was "not entirely clear what NATO is saying", Laity showed no such doubts:

Well what they are saying is that they are *very confident* that they attacked a military convoy ... and that the pilots came back saying they are *confident* they hit military targets. Now *that would preclude the idea of them hitting tractors or something of that kind because clearly they're easily identifiable as non-military, because that's what they're saying: absolute confidence* that they hit a military convoy. (Emphasis added)

Yet Laity belies a complete collapse in this "absolute confidence" when he closes thus: "By implication they're saying they did not hit those civilians but *they're not absolutely certain*. They're still investigating reports. *Privately there's a lot of suspicion* about what is going on there" (emphasis added).

NATO took another five days before finally presenting a definitive account of the circumstances surrounding the convoy attack and during that time, and quite independently of the NATO media pool, news presenters and correspondents assessed the contradictory evidence with the sort of scepticism and open-mindedness seriously lacking during the Gulf War in 1991 and the bombing of Iraq in 1998. For Channel Four News in Britain, "The question remains: what were NATO planes doing in the area and why did they decide to attack these convoys which included tractors and cars?" (14 April 1999). Later that evening, *Newsnight's* probe opened with this cautionary gambit "You won't find any starker examples of Dr Johnson's adage that *truth is the first casualty of war* than today's deaths in Kosovo." Correspondent James Robbins considered NATO's case but cautioned that "*NATO has missed military targets and hit civilians before* and tonight in Brussels the alliance spokesman, Jamie Shea, was *much more guarded in his response*" (emphasis added). The next day, 15 April, NATO admitted that in fact there had been two vehicle convoys hit in different locations in the Djackovice area and that one of those, a refugee convoy, may have been hit by NATO planes. The NATO line was that if this was the case it was regrettable but that the bomb was dropped "in good faith". The media were still doubtful. "Despite NATO's admission," said the NBC Pentagon correspondent, "there are still more troubling questions tonight about the attack and it could be

even worse than first imagined" (15 April 1999). The ironic *Guardian* headline the next morning quoted the military briefer: "When the pilot attacked, they were military vehicles. If they turned out to be tractors, that is a different issue" (16 April 1999). However, the trickle of information and lack of hard evidence only served to sow more confusion among the news media about what exactly happened and what NATO was doing. As news anchor Anna Ford remarked, "There's still a lot of information that doesn't add up here. It sounds rather fishy"; while, according to the correspondent in Serbia, the blunder and its fallout constituted "a serious blow to NATO. Its credibility and its effectiveness are being questioned" (BBC1 18:00, 15 April 1999). CNN remarked that "independent verification of what's happening on the ground in Kosovo is very hard to come by" and featured a short telephone report from Paul Watson of the *Los Angeles Times*, who thought that NATO's bombing campaign was forcing more civilians in Kosovo on the road than Serbian ethnic cleansing (see Watson, 1999). The news anchor, Bernard Shaw, also noted the amount of "conflicting information coming from Belgrade, NATO and the Pentagon" (17:00, 15 April 1999). NBC reported "one senior Pentagon official [saying] he's 'mystified' by NATO's silence. And NATO tonight is denying nothing" (17:30, 15 April 1999).

"NATO is on the back foot tonight," began Channel Four News. It remarked that "NATO's line has changed repeatedly" and that while "the Serbs have allowed foreign cameras rare access to otherwise dark corners of Kosovo ... NATO has so far chosen not to show military video of exactly what happened during its attack". So why the absence of video evidence? That would surely vindicate NATO's claims that the Serbs bombed the convoys and that NATO planes only targeted and hit military vehicles and positions? James Foley, spokesman for the US State Department, accused the Western media of not demanding access from the Serbs to Kosovo and the "horrific images of the poor victims". The news anchor Jon Snow responded, "Well you see the thing which is perplexing us is that *the Western alliance is not giving Western media access to*

images either" in spite of its much vaunted aerial surveillance technologies (Channel Four News, 15 April 1999; emphasis added).

The unavailability of video evidence lay at the heart of NATO's difficulty in presenting its case in the days after the convoy bombing. But it also raised the wider, much more awkward truth of the accuracy of imaging equipment even at high altitude. For if that was to be revealed, it would blow away the insistent NATO line that high-altitude bombing was necessary to secure the lives of the pilots and that this had the unfortunate effect of lessening the ability of pilots to accurately identify and lock on to targets, and to distinguish between military and civilian buildings and vehicles. "Not true, not true!" argues Jake Lynch. "There might have been a military calculation to minimise the number of such flights they had to do for various reasons, anything from conserving fuel to evading anti-aircraft fire, but it certainly isn't true they took *every* precaution to minimise civilian deaths ... The truth is it was a balance of calculations where the worth of civilian lives was being weighed against the risk to NATO pilots' lives, which is understandable but not what was being told to us."⁵

The Serbs of course had their own propaganda agenda and they were well attuned to Western media demands for pictures of the incident. For BBC and ITN, the test for Western journalists based in Belgrade was how accommodating the Ministry of Defence would be in granting access to the bombsites. In the immediate aftermath of the bombing, John Simpson thought it "quite possible a trip will be arranged for people to go down there and see it. If that's so then it will, I think, indicate that the Serbs are pretty confident about their side of the story. If it becomes impossible to take us down, well I think there will be a big question mark over it" (BBC1, 21:00, 14 April 1999). Journalist Maggie O'Kane thinks the presence of journalists on the ground in these instances, sending back first-hand information about events such as the convoy incident, explains why NATO struggled to put its case clearly and definitively from the outset.⁶ If that is so then it was by default, since without official sanction from Belgrade, movement

around Kosovo for Western journalists was to say the least a hazardous and problematical proposition.

Sweating the Spin: NATO responds

NATO's press relations budget for the Serbia/Kosovo operation was between 50 and 60 million Belgian francs; at 1999 exchange rates that was about £882,252. Its chief press spokesman, Jamie Shea, reveals that rather than bidding for a supplementary public relations budget he "raided the existing budget". Most of the money went towards equipping a press centre adequate to the needs of the international media presence in Brussels for the duration of the air campaign. This was what he had been "begging for years for" to no avail "but which had suddenly become instantaneously and miraculously available during the air operation. So necessity was the mother of procurement if not invention".⁷ But an organisation like NATO must work as well as pay for good media coverage and cannot depend too much on the Gulf War effect. Midway through the operation, in May, the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* published what was purported to be an internal NATO report lamenting the poor state of NATO battle readiness when it came to launching its media and public relations campaign (Goff, 2000, p. 18). Shea says that the document was "not without value" but nonetheless denies it was an official document or that its unauthorised release had anything to do with him or anyone in his office. He does, however, concede that there were problems. He explains, for example, that just as the operation got underway he had to send half his staff to Washington for NATO's 50th anniversary summit and so he was "really flying by the seat of [his] pants for the first four or six weeks". The lesson, he says, is "that we have to have a big [media] organisation, even if we don't need it, from day one. It's better to have it and not need it than not have it and be found wanting."⁸ There is suspicion in some quarters that the NATO press office laboured too much under the weight of media expectation in the 24-hour news cycle. Alex Thomson refers to "a kind of culture of information intimidation" whereby NATO was

“caught up in this desperate need to furnish this media beast with information at top speed”. He suggests that “They don’t have to give daily briefings if they don’t want to—give a weekly briefing! I mean they make the rules!”⁹ Jake Lynch of Sky News was aware of “a lot of acrimony behind the scenes [due to] the fact that Jamie Shea wasn’t given the information” about the exact circumstances of the convoy bombing. Yet even at that, and this is from a purely NATO perspective, Shea “inadvertently gave us more information than he should have done”.¹⁰ Shea tells it differently. Far from being denied information by the Pentagon at such a crucial juncture, he was the one who held it up because he thought it partial and in the long run detrimental to NATO credibility:

But I was partly responsible because when the military did come forward on day two with a so-called explanation, I canned it and sent them back to the drawing board, which made me obviously not the most loved person at the time, not only with the military but of course with all the journalists who thought I was indulging in some kind of cover-up operation. But having listened to the military briefing after two days I decided that it simply didn’t answer the questions and, rather than giving an inadequate briefing that was only going to expose us to ridicule, I preferred to not have anything until we could present the whole story ... Partial explanations are often worse than nothing.¹¹

Not only that, he says, but the Pentagon, in the shape of spokesman Ken Bacon, stepped in behind him and added some punch to his position so that, eventually, “I think we got the message through that this was so important in terms of NATO’s public image and credibility ... that this was a real conflict with real consequences and that therefore we had to adjust.” The adjustment came during the public relations (PR) crisis over the refugee convoy bombing. Alistair Campbell, press secretary to Prime Minister Blair, stepped in to urge a revamp of NATO’s PR operation, an intervention Shea thinks was decisive. “There was a blockage there,” he says, “and sometimes in organisations you need people with clout to overcome those blockages.”¹² Any intervention by Campbell into controversial issues or events is bound to become a story in itself in the

British media and Jake Lynch notes that Campbell’s influence extended much further and deeper than simply supporting Shea’s efforts with human and material resources. It shaped the whole presentation of information and material—which was to “sort of ration out small nuggets of information and wrap around that as much material as you can in order to project the kind of story you want to project”. In other words, “It had been very effectively New Labourised in that they thought [in terms of] stories. They decided from day one to try and control the agenda and did a reasonable job of it.”¹³ As a result, a good majority of British and American journalists accepted the fundamental rationale for bombing Serbia and Kosovo in spite of the rather dubious legal grounds on which it was carried out. They successfully forged a liberal, humanitarian consensus abroad that squeezed out radical dissent more effectively than was the case during the Gulf War in 1991 (Chandler, 2000; Chomsky, 1999). It is also the case that the NATO media pool was too willing to be fed information and digest it as transparent accounts of events on the ground rather than as selective and self-serving presentations of those events.

Mark Laity provides some hint of the thinking behind this passive media impulse. He is clear on his attitude to military sources, the briefings and the information they release. “If you don’t trust the military,” he says, “and they’re the ones dropping the bombs, who are you going to trust?” He rejects as unfair the criticisms of his performance during the briefings and on air. He was one of the few journalists, he points out, who badgered the briefers about the circumstances of the convoy incident—about whether there was not one but actually two separate attacks on two separate convoys. “So in a sense it was me, who tied them up into knots,” he argues, “not the hostile journalists who were committed ... the ones who were making tendentious political points.”¹⁴ One of the “committed” journalists Laity has in mind is Robert Fisk, Middle East specialist correspondent for the London *Independent*, whose dismissal of Laity and most of his colleagues at the NATO briefings is withering: “Most of the journalists at the NATO

briefings were sheep. Baaaa Baaaa! That's all it was."¹⁵ Laity insists, however, that "The challenge for journalists is not to get all worked up because somebody has spun you; the challenge is to spot the spin and take it out ... And if I don't spot it then more fool me and good luck to them. It's a game. So, spun information? They spun a lot but to my way of thinking they ... were not deliberately lying."¹⁶ Perhaps not surprisingly, Jamie Shea is complimentary towards journalists like Laity, whom he counts as his "customers", in contrast with "moral perfectionists" such as Fisk: "I've got more time for a lot of [journalists] who were basically in the middle, that listened to us but came to their own balanced, professional judgement on things."¹⁷ Shea was obviously pleased that his "customers" sat back and grazed after the organisation got its act together and got "New Labourised". He takes this as a compliment to the way in which NATO recovered the public relations initiative in its presentation of the bombing of Serbia:

I'll never forget one of my final briefings ... at the end of May when we had another one of these incidents, number 13, when NATO struck a block of flats in a little town on the Montenegrin border ... I didn't wait for journalists to ask me for the information; I came straight out with it because I had all the information without having to wait for five days and no journalists asked me a question, not one!, whereas a couple of months earlier Djakovice had become the single dominant issue. It was almost by that time treated as what the French call a *fait divers*, a passing little story of no great significance. We made more of it than the press did at the end. It was almost a reversal of roles.¹⁸

Concluding Remarks

The majority of journalists present at the briefings will cringe to hear Shea say that and so they should; there was no doubt that he got the measure of the media pool during the Kosovo crisis. However, my argument here is that passivity in the pool was not reflected across all sections of the news media. It would be unfair to present a critique of their coverage that did not give credit for more sceptical journalism when and where it is due. Richard Keeble (1999) and Philip Hammond (1999; 2000)

present damning critiques of British news reporting of NATO's operation in Serbia and Kosovo but they present insufficient evidence to argue, as Hammond does, that media coverage was "highly conformist" (1999, p. 63) or to support the conclusion that "one casualty of the Kosovo war was British journalism, although some sources maintain it was already long dead. In its place we have propaganda" (ibid., p. 67). Phillip Knightley comes to much the same conclusion with a deeply pessimistic verdict that war correspondents are at a "crisis point" in their history. They are no longer heroes, he says, and they will have to make up their minds whether they are mythmakers and propagandists (2000, pp. 525–26). Knightley will know that two correspondents he would regard as "heroes", William Howard Russell and Richard Harding Davis, made the same bleak pronouncements about the state of their craft at the end of their careers.

These wide-sweeping condemnations of the Kosovo coverage are more like rapid-fire responses based on first impressions than considered critiques of a reliable and representative sample of coverage. The evidence from this study of television news coverage of the campaign suggests that, in the case of the British news media at any rate, there *was* real media counterweight to NATO spin and it was to be found not in the briefing rooms of Brussels, or among those journalists in Kosovo or in the refugee camps in Albania, but in the news rooms back in London and to a much lesser extent Washington. That, I think, is significant. Journalism in Britain might be ailing but it is not always and in all cases propaganda and it is most certainly not dead.

Coda

Has the media's coverage of America's "war on terrorism" given grounds for further optimism? It is much too early to make a definitive judgement but six weeks into the bombing of Afghanistan (7 October) the signs are not good. To take just one of many examples of lazy journalism, the Pentagon's video footage of American Special Forces in action inside Afghanistan was met with a media feeding

frenzy. ITN reported that the team had stormed a Taliban air base and taken it “with virtually no resistance” yet neglected to make clear that it had been very lightly defended in the first place because it had been blown out of operational use by American bombers. The BBC reported that the team destroyed a small cache of weapons left at the scene: some small arms and a rocket launcher. This was a big anti-climax by the action hero standards the video set from its beginning but the US military got away with it and must have been delighted at the media’s readiness to endorse such material as transparently factual information. As if there was ever any doubt, the Washington correspondent for Channel Four News helpfully emphasised the “clear” message the Pentagon said it was conveying through the video: “that ... we can deploy, we can manoeuvre, we can infiltrate without interference at our time and place of choosing” (19:00, 20 October 2001). The other message it conveys of course is that the Pentagon can deploy and manoeuvre the Western media to promote even the most dubious and ludicrous propaganda material as long as it

dresses it up as “news”. The question is whether or not media conformity has been achieved as a result of sustained pressure and tactical flak from official quarters? There were certainly several attempts at enforcement, such as Tony Blair’s appeal to senior journalists that they think carefully about their approach to “enemy” propaganda, or official British and American pressure on the Qatari satellite TV company Al Jazeera not to broadcast propaganda material from Osama bin Laden. There has also been pressure from within, such as the internal memo to CNN news and editorial staff requesting that they constantly remind viewers that America was at war because of what happened on 11 September, echoing Tony Blair’s “never forget” speech. Such pressure is an inevitable political tactic in wartime and has been a hallmark of a British administration notoriously neurotic about policy presentation and the media’s power and influence over public opinion. What is not inevitable is that journalists fall in behind the war effort and happily do what they are told.

Notes

- ¹ See, for example, “War Speak: media management in the Gulf War”, *Index on Censorship* 20(4–5), 1991; “Briefings: what we saw, what we learned”, *Columbia Journalism Review*, May/June 1991, pp. 23–32.
- ² The above analysis is based on a sample of British and American television news programmes from 12 to 19 April 1999: BBC News at 13:00, 18:00, 21:00, and BBC2 *Newsnight* at 22:30; ITN bulletins at 12:30, 18:30, 23:00, and Channel Four News at 19:00; the sample of American programmes comprised CNN and NBC bulletins at 17:00 on each day of the sample period.
- ³ Interview with the author, London, 1 December 1999.
- ⁴ Telephone interview with the author, 2 February 2000.
- ⁵ Interview with the author, London, 1 December 1999.
- ⁶ Telephone interview with the author, 29 February 2000.
- ⁷ Telephone interview with the author, 2 February 2000.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Interview with the author, London, 29 November 1999.
- ¹⁰ Interview with the author, London, 1 December 1999.
- ¹¹ Telephone interview with the author, 2 February 2000.
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ Interview with the author, London, 1 December 1999.
- ¹⁴ Interview with the author, London, 18 November, 1999; Mark Laity has since left the BBC to take up a new post as assistant press secretary to Jamie Shea at NATO Headquarters in Brussels.
- ¹⁵ Interview with the author, Belfast, 18 October 1999.
- ¹⁶ Interview with the author, London, 18 November 1999.
- ¹⁷ Telephone interview with the author, 2 February 2000.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*

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