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## Introduction

■ *Philip M. Taylor*

One year on after Operation Allied Force, victims of ethnic violence continue to die in Kosovo. The Serb army has gone, together with many of the former Serb population, allegedly as a result of NATO's 'victory through air power'. Instead, British, American, German, French and Russian soldiers from the Kosovo Implementation Force, known as KFOR, are expected to keep 'the peace' on the ground, prevent further 'ethnic cleansing' and help rebuild those devastated parts of the Serb province which NATO air power helped to cause. The sceptics are having a field day, while the Serbian population emerges miserably from a winter of economic sanctions, the Milosovic government settles its political scores and French soldiers struggle to keep remaining Serbs and Kosovo Albanians apart by forming a line across a bridge in Mitrovica. Meanwhile, as the process of military 'lessons learned' for NATO unfolds, media scholars are doing a similar exercise, as this special issue of the *European Journal of Communication* illustrates. We present here their preliminary findings about the extraordinary events surrounding the Kosovo conflict.

There are some disquieting — if not altogether unsurprising — findings. As the authors here demonstrate, during the spring of 1999 major western news organizations found themselves caught up in the propaganda surrounding the conflict, especially NATO propaganda (although, of course, NATO would deny that it was 'propaganda', preferring instead 'information campaign'). The media replicated, often uncritically, the line of western political leaders that this was a 'humanitarian intervention' on behalf of the Kosovo Albanians, and they

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*European Journal of Communication* Copyright © 2000 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi), Vol 15(3): 293–297. [0267–3231(200009)15:3;293–297;013849]

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marginalized dissent and debate about the legal and indeed wider moral implications about an enlarged NATO's new, post-Cold War, role not just within Europe but also possibly beyond. During the conflict itself, the media were rarely criticized for their coverage by governments — itself a clue that the latter were happy with the former. When they were criticized — the BBC's John Simpson in Belgrade being one such rare example — it was equally a clue that those now rather outdated performance indicators of balance and objectivity in war reporting were actually being applied.

To unpack such a statement, one needs to understand the operational constraints affecting the work of journalists in wartime. It may seem a platitude to state that wars are extremely dangerous places and journalists, no matter how competitive they might have become in a deregulated, global and commercialized environment, recognize that being read is better than being dead. Kosovo itself was no different, especially since the dangers were not just from NATO bombing but also from an indigenous population at war with itself and acutely aware of the importance of capturing the moral high ground in the battle for global public sympathy. When justifications in international law or the certainties of diplomatic negotiations around Rambouillet were absent, it was essential for each side to capture the 'moral high ground' where such complex niceties as the traditional rules of law, war and diplomacy became secondary to 'the right thing to do'. In such circumstances, journalists attempting to search for 'the truth' in Kosovo in the public service tradition of reporting both sides became spies or propagandists in the eyes of the other side. As a result, for all the media saturation coverage surrounding the conflict, the region of Kosovo itself was an information vacuum with comparatively little or reliable news coming out of the area in which the events which prompted NATO's strikes in the first place were allegedly taking place.

Without journalists on the ground to serve as independent witnesses most media representatives (and there were around 3000 of them covering the conflict) took the safer option of reporting from a distance. The key battlegrounds in the 'information war' were the Kosovo borders, NATO's military headquarters, the Supreme Headquarters of Allied Powers in Europe (SHAPE) in Mons, Belgium and the capital cities of the warring states, especially Washington, London, Paris, Berlin and Belgrade. From the borders of Albania and Macedonia came powerful and emotive television images of an endless stream of fleeing refugees. The cumulative 'evidence' of their testimony about Serb ethnic cleansing seemed overwhelming as the media framed them, and their erstwhile

'terrorist' militia, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), as victims of Serb barbarity. The comparison with Belgium, 1914, was striking. Then an endless stream of civilians from 'poor little Belgium' testified before the Bryce Commission in London that the advancing German armed forces had behaved with barbarity and savagery towards them, especially women and children. Although the Bryce Report that framed the demonization of 'the brutal Hun' in the First World War has long been discredited by historians, the legacy of that stereotyping survives even today. And although UN and other post-conflict investigations into the allegations about ethnic cleansing in Kosovo are indeed finding evidence of atrocities (which happen in all wars), they are not, as yet, on anything like a scale as that portrayed at the time in the media to justify the violations of international law in the name of 'humanitarian war'.

Time, they say, is a great healer. How much time is needed to heal the wounds, especially in areas like the Balkans, is a question that vexes SFOR (Stabilization Force) and KFOR alike. But at times of war, as events unfold rapidly, journalists simply do not have the time to reflect upon the larger issues. They respond to incidents in order to meet deadlines that are increasingly measured in hours, minutes or even in 'real time'. But this only partly helps to explain what, it has to be said, was a poor media performance. In addition to the usual 'fog of war', governments and international organizations like NATO are devoting more and more time and resources to what we now call 'spin'. From SHAPE, where Dr Jamie Shea debated the issues with journalists at daily press conferences, to the more reticent Serbian Ministry of Information, complete with its own website, official spokespersons attempted to fill the Kosovo information vacuum with their own special interest interpretation of events. In its most polarized form, Belgrade argued that the Kosovo Albanians were fleeing to the borders of Albania and Macedonia because of NATO bombing, whereas NATO insisted that this sad march of humanity was the creation of Serb ethnic cleansing. While official Serb television stations seized on NATO 'accidents' such as the bombing of civilian convoys, bridges, embassies and hospitals, NATO's decision to attack the Radio Television Serbia (RTS) building revealed just how much the media had become participants in modern conflicts, rather than mere observers of them. When cruise missiles exploded in the RTS building in the early hours of 24 April 1999, the literary tendency to 'shoot the messenger' had reached its military realization.

Time — and the release of official documentation over time — will undoubtedly provide us with the answers to some of the questions which still remain about what actually happened during the conflict. In the

meantime, we have the media record to analyse and assess as the 'first rough draft of history'. We already know it is very much a *rough* draft. No matter how much social scientists may lament this, the role of the mass media as the conveyer of news about the doings of the few to the many remains a phenomenon that we need to understand. How has that role changed? How much has it changed since the end of the Cold War with its simplistic (relatively) Manichean framework? To what extent is technology, trade and training driving the changes? What are the consequences of the changes? Comparisons between Kosovo and the media coverage of the Gulf War of 1991 are inevitable, and permeate the articles published here. They are, after all, the two purely inter-state conflicts involving western powers (especially the USA and Britain, as the dominant news brokers) of the last decade of the 20th century. As such, they provoked massive and intense media coverage on a global scale. For all our unanswered questions, however, it has to be said that what we know now, a year on, differs only marginally from what we were told at the time. Subsequent revelations and research may alter questions of interpretation of the known 'facts', but the general overall picture differs much less subsequently than one might expect, especially in such a short period after the conflict itself. As a point of comparative reference, one need only consider the state of public knowledge one year after the end of the Second World War to realize just how difficult it is to keep secrets about the conduct of wars at the end of the 20th century.

The remaining major conflicts of the 1990s (Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda) are more accurately described as intra-state crises caused by the collapse of civic society, the horrors of which are made all the more visible and graphic by the presence of television cameras. If, as media scholars, we still cannot dispel the popular idea that 'the camera never lies', then we accept at least the need to understand what precise role the media play within our society, not as a conveyer of 'truth' in any absolute sense but in satisfying other societal needs. This will in turn tell us something about ourselves, and that, perhaps, is the greatest challenge facing us all.

In recent years, a growing body of literature has emerged evaluating the so-called 'CNN effect', namely the alleged impact of real-time television on the foreign policy-making process. This research has told us a great deal about our politicians and their ability, or otherwise, to resist dramatic and emotive pictures. Yet we continue to struggle with the entire 'media effects' issue. Nor is our task going to be made any easier by the arrival of new media that 'demassifies' the audience into individual or small group disseminators and receivers of information beyond the confines, and professional codes, of traditional journalism. The arrival of

the World Wide Web since 1992 (as distinct from the Internet itself) has revolutionized the international flow of information. It is also likely to have a significant effect on information flows during wartime. Kosovo was our first glimpse of this although, given that only a very small proportion of the world's population has ever logged onto the World Wide Web, we are perhaps at the same stage of development as television and the Korean War. Nevertheless, Vietnam was only 10 years later than Korea, and it was a little surprising that advanced information societies in the NATO alliance, for all their decade-long debates about information warfare, were caught out by Serb 'cyberwarfare'. It was not just a question of firing viruses into NATO computers or interfering with the White House's website, but of how much could be achieved by a comparatively small number of Serbs with access to a global system of communications. Hence the 'hegemonic' lines of governments at war, and the mass media replication of them, could be challenged, debated and refuted by individuals on personal web sites or in chat rooms. It helps to explain why telephone exchanges and power stations (and indeed mainstream television stations) have become more significant primary targets for bombing than the factories and shipyards of the Second World War. However, even this could not prevent a Belgrade housewife using her mobile phone to call a BBC Radio Five Live chat show to implore British listeners to put pressure on their government to stop the bombing of her city.

These are indeed exciting times for communications scholars. Yet, for the moment, we need to keep hold of the fact that the vast majority of people still rely on the traditional media as their principal source of information. Media performance remains a central issue and, through the variety of disciplinary approaches employed by scholars in this special issue, raises serious issues. Media practitioners will not enjoy the findings. Many will no doubt dismiss them, as they often do, by the charge that academics have no understanding of the 'real world'. But one can only hope, as in 1914–15 or indeed in 1999, that the cumulative evidence should indeed prove compelling for them. More time than the one year that has elapsed and more academic research is needed to evaluate the media's performance in the war over Kosovo in its true historical context. But of all people, they should know better than to react by shooting the messenger. One year on after Operation Allied Force, it is time for the shooting to stop.