

The media dimension in foreign interventions*

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“I don’t think you can fight a war today without taking into account the media focus, that’s a reality today. So you have to plan how to handle your media strategy, just as you plan your operational strategy for any campaign.” (Col P.J. Crawley, spokesman National Security Council)¹

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*“Il n’y a pas de gestion de guerre sans une gestion de la communication.”
(Col J.-E. Winckler - Délégation à l’Information et à la Communication de la Défense)²*

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“Winning the media campaign is just as important as winning the military campaign.... The media is not an optional add-on; it is key” (NATO Spokesman Jamie Shea)³

With recent major advances in computing and telecommunications making possible the processing of huge volumes of data and information, and their global and instant dissemination, the world has entered both an information and a media revolution. This media revolution has taken place at a time when the international environment has undergone a radical transformation with the end of the Cold War and radical changes in the nature of conflicts in the 1990s. The end of the East-West confrontation, however, did not translate into a more stable world as both the frequency and intensity of regional and internal conflicts intensified throughout the world. At the end of 1999 there were at least some 40 conflicts being fought on the territories of 36 countries.⁴

These conflicts have in turn led liberal democracies to intervene on peacekeeping, peace-enforcement or humanitarian missions. Nearly all these interventions have been widely covered by the media, many even say some of these interventions were in fact media-led.

In the 1980s most wars generally took place within the broad context of the Cold War when the Soviet Union and its allies on one side, and the USA and other Western countries, on the other, supported opposing warring factions. Post Cold War conflicts are of a completely different nature: the ideological dimension has all but disappeared and they are mainly provoked by local leaders and groups trying to exacerbate local differences for personal gains, the main victims being civilians. The best examples of that new trend are the wars which have devastated the former Yugoslavia since 1991.

As liberal democracies no longer face a major and constant threat to their long-term vital interests or even very survival in the shape of Soviet Communism, and as their main adversaries have become partners or even allies, they find themselves increasingly drawn into a number of external interventions, often prompted by humanitarian concerns, as part of a coalition, or of international efforts under the aegis of the UN or regional organisations.⁵

In this new international environment the media due to their impact on public opinions, have a major and unprecedented impact on international developments.

* Draft conference paper prepared for the “Challenges to Governance: Military Interventions Abroad and Consensus at Home”, organised by the Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP) in Montréal, 17-18 November 2000. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author, not those of the BBC. All comments and suggestions welcome, please forward to: e-mail: mhf@bigfoot.com; or: 3 Goodrich Close, Caversham, RG4 6QZ, United Kingdom

Interventions abroad – for peace keeping, peace enforcement or humanitarian reasons – and conflicts will in the future include, to a very large extent, a media dimension and all players will have to integrate a media component into their overall strategy.

Information and media revolutions

Information, knowledge, have become the major sources of wealth, power and growth. Modern societies are increasingly dependent on a constant flow of information and reliant on computers (information technology) with all sectors – industries, power grids, transport networks, water supplies – now relying on computers. The military – in the United States in particular – is giving information a decisive role in modern warfare: information supremacy is seen as an essential goal to attain in order to prevail in conflicts and Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW). As a result the concept of Information Warfare (IW) has gained in scope and importance in recent years. Although it concentrates mainly on attacking enemy's information assets (Command, Control, Communications, Computers and Intelligence) and protecting one's own, it includes a certain element regarding the media environment.

The convergence of the new and the old: the electronic media revolution

The information revolution has prompted extraordinary advances in telecommunications and computer technologies and the emergence of the digital technology.

The telecommunication sector has expanded dramatically in recent years with major improvements in existing technologies (communications satellites or even the “plain old telephone system”) and the introduction of new technologies such as mobile communications.

Satellites, with their ability to transmit information instantly and globally, represent the backbone of the electronic media revolution.

Computers are also making major and continuous progress as their processing power increases constantly whilst their cost and size keep falling.

Digitisation, which allows the compression of large volumes of data (text, sound, moving or still pictures) and their immediate transfer, together with advances in the telecommunications sector, has made possible the instant exchange of news throughout the world.

Advances in the satellite industry illustrate the magnitude and potential of these changes: as of April 2000 the magazine ‘Via Satellite’ recorded 222 Western-built commercial communications satellites in orbit (up 50 per cent on 1996) with 52 more on order. These satellites carried some 5,000 transponders (against 3,076 in 1996), approximately half of these transponders being used for broadcasting services (cable TV relay, direct-to-home, DTH, broadcasting).⁶ With digitisation offering the possibility of carrying up to eight TV channels on each transponder these satellites can potentially carry well over 10,000 broadcasting services.

According to Hughes Telecommunications & Space Co., the per dollar cost-effectiveness of its current generation of HS601 satellites (in service with PanAmSat, AsiaSat and Europe's SES/Astra) is 20 times greater than that of its 1980s HS376 model; its newly-introduced HS702 will increase cost effectiveness by another factor of five by 2000. In all, combined with digital compression, its future satellites will be more than 500 times as cost effective as those of the 1980s, Hughes says. This greater

effectiveness has a direct impact on the cost of satellite transmission with transponders now being leased for as little as \$1m a year, allowing political and dissident groups to gain a global reach (for instance, Med TV, a Kurdish satellite TV channel broadcasting to viewers in Europe and the Middle East, launched its operations from London in May 1995, much to the annoyance of the Turkish authorities which linked the channel to the Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK. Med TV saw its licence revoked by the UK Independent Television Commission in April 1999 following a number of "inflammatory statements encouraging acts of violence in Turkey and elsewhere". The station relocated in Paris and relaunched in July 1999 as Medya TV).⁷

The convergence of these advances, of the massive global expansion of existing electronic-based media (with the total number of TV sets in the world swelling from 299 millions in 1970 to around 1.5 billion in 2000, that of radio receivers from 906 millions to more than 2.5 billions⁸), of the emergence of new technologies, such as electronic and satellite news gathering, and of the advent of a new medium, the Internet, as a significant and effective news-delivery system have resulted in a media revolution which has completely transformed the way news and information are collected, packaged, circulated and accessed throughout the world.

This media revolution has been described by Alvin Toffler as "the combined *interplay* of many different technologies. Millions of computers, fax machines, printers and copying machines, VCRs, videocassettes, advanced telephones, along with cable and satellite technologies, now interact with one another and cannot be understood in isolation... the new media are closely interlinked and fused together, feeding data, images and symbols back and forth to one another. Examples of this fusion abound... newspaper newsrooms watch TV monitors to keep abreast of the latest events. Many European correspondents in Washington watch CNN's live coverage and write their newspaper stories on what television shows them. From serving as a medium television becomes the source... It is this dense interpenetration that transforms the individual media into a *system*. Combined with globalisation, it reduces the clout of any single medium, channel, publication, or technology relative to all the others. But it endows the media system-as-a-whole with an enormously enhanced power that permeates the planet. What is at work, therefore, is not 'videocracy' but 'media-fusion'."⁹

The main features of this electronic media revolution are an explosion in the number of broadcasting outlets and the global, real-time, exchange of information. It has thus resulted in the emergence of what could be best described as a Global Media Environment.

Global Media Environment and the new international environment

A unique characteristic of this Global Media Environment is that it directly affects international relations and the way conflicts are being managed. Most people in developed countries get their news through the electronic media, television in particular, the public perception of international events is now being essentially shaped by television pictures which carry a considerable greater emotional weight than words (based also largely on the general delusion that "pictures, unlike words, don't lie") but rarely provide all the necessary background needed to develop a properly informed opinion.

In this picture-driven news environment no pictures (that is mainly no TV pictures) means no news.

As a result public opinions tend to react emotionally and instantly to international events, particularly to situations of humanitarian distress, often provoked by local conflicts or civil unrest, and demand swift action, placing great pressure on policy-makers to intervene militarily in situations where they would not have done so in the past, or at least not with the same degree of urgency.

The overall landscape is also complicated by the ever larger number of players – governments, armed forces, NGOs, lobbying groups, revolutionary and dissident movements, and even individuals – now using the various media (including the Internet) to achieve their aims and influence (or control) domestic or foreign public opinions at times of crises.

Foreign and security policies which, more than any other aspects of government, were the exclusive preserve of a limited number of players until fairly recently have now entered the public domain.

By shaping public opinions to a much greater extent and much more quickly than in the past, electronic media now have a significant influence on the definition and conduct of foreign policy and military interventions.

As policy-makers are forced to deal with this new trend, their strategy in cases of foreign interventions – be they minor or major, of a military or civilian nature, driven by reasons of national interest or, increasingly, by humanitarian considerations – must now integrate, to a much larger degree, a media dimension.

Global Media Environment: enters global news

The electronic media revolution, with its explosion in the number of broadcasting outlets, has resulted in an insatiable need for content, news in particular, and wars and natural disasters represent good content for broadcasters. At the same time, new technologies transforming the collection and distribution of news (making them available instantly and globally), the relative limited number of television pictures providers (the same footage, sometimes shot by freelance reporters, is being shown throughout the world) and the spectacular expansion in the number of news channels have brought about a globalisation and a certain uniformity in the presentation of news and in the perception of international events which, being essentially image-based, is often lacking in background.

At the same time, a number of television channels broadcasting mainly news globally or regionally are available to a large audience. The best known are naturally CNN, launched in 1985, CNN International can be received in more than 151 million television households in 212 countries and territories through a network of 23 satellites; CNN en Español broadcasts in Spanish to an extra 10 million households (CNN's branded networks and services combined are available to more than 1 billion people in 212 countries and territories); BBC World TV (1991), which can reach 167 million homes in nearly 200 countries and territories; Deutsche Welle-tv (1993) which broadcasts in German, English and Spanish to 104 million households world-wide; the pan-European image-based channel EuroNews, (1993), broadcasting in six European languages to over 95 million households in more than 43 countries throughout Europe and the Mediterranean Basin. Other news channels, such as MSNBC or Bloomberg TV, are more business-orientated, but also carry other news.

These channels have a considerable audience and they have now be joined by a number of round-the-clock national news channels in many countries.

Security policy and the Global Media Environment

Policy-makers in developed countries (and later elsewhere) have always exploited the media to muster public support for their domestic and foreign policies.

Many governments, both democratic and authoritarian, have also used the media, mainly international broadcasting, to influence foreign public opinions, what is often referred to as “public diplomacy”. Western broadcasts to the former Soviet bloc have in fact been widely credited with having made a significant contribution to the eventual collapse of Communism in Eastern and Central Europe.

The media have, for a long time, played an important role in shaping public opinion in the international and security domains, often conveying government’s policies to the public and/or pushing their own agenda. The power of the media is such that they have been credited on a number of occasions with encouraging foreign interventions¹⁰ or for being responsible for national setbacks.

In that respect the Vietnam war marked a watershed. War reporting, due to its nature, was always the object of certain restrictions. A major change took place in the USA at the time of the Vietnam war in which journalists were granted an extensive and almost unrestricted access to the whole theatre of operations allowing an extensive coverage of the war and bringing the fighting to US homes. This new approach eventually turned public opinion against the war, prompting Marshall McLuhan to comment: “Television brought the brutality of war into the comfort of the living room. Vietnam was lost in the living rooms of America – not the battlefields of Vietnam”.¹¹ The Vietnam war had a major impact on the relationship between the media, on one side, politicians and the military on the other, and was to influence the way war is now being reported, not just in the USA, but in other countries too.

Another, more sinister example of the power of the media in the security sphere is that given by “hate media” which stir up ethnic or religious hatred and have been blamed for encouraging a number of conflicts and genocides, as illustrated by the instrumental role played in Rwanda by the infamous Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) in the 1994 genocide of hundreds of thousands of Tutsis and moderate Hutus opposed to the government of the time.

To counteract the action of “hate media” a number of NGOs and international broadcasters have launched special programmes to bring balanced programmes to populations living in zones of conflicts and to rebuild the media and civil society in post-conflict situations.¹²

In the past governments dealt with a very limited number of media outlets – with whom they often entertained a cosy relationship – to convey their policies to the public in the sphere of security policy. Furthermore, foreign policy has hardly ever been a priority for the general public in most countries, except when it led to war. With the emergence of the Global Media Environment this lack of interest disappeared and policy-makers now face the difficult tasks of explaining their policies to the public via a large number of often critical media outlets and of trying to stem the impact of the latter, particularly of television, on their freedom of action.

Television pictures, with their potent emotional content, have completely transformed the general public’s relation to news and its perception of international affairs. Public opinions are also being increasingly targeted by a growing number of actors: individuals, parties, NGOs, lobbies – exploiting TV pictures and the ever larger number of media outlets as well as using the Internet, to further their goals both

at home and abroad, transforming the media into major actors in international relations.

It is often argued that interventions are now being mainly triggered by emotional reactions on the part of a public distressed by television pictures, the so-called “CNN effect” rather than by well-informed opinions or the defence of national interests. As public opinions in democratic societies get exposed to shocking pictures of human suffering brought about by wars and natural disasters – generously aired by television channels chasing scoops and ratings – they may bring great pressure on governments to “do something”. Conversely, television pictures can also lead public opinions to demand an untimely end to interventions abroad, even when important interests are at stake.

The globalisation and standardisation of news and their growing emotional content make public opinions more fickle and complicate the role of policy-makers in the sphere of security policy.

National interests in the new international environment

Security policies of liberal democracies have traditionally been mainly dictated by the perception of their national interests, these obviously vary greatly from country to country, from region to region, and largely determine their readiness to embark on foreign interventions.

The end of the Cold War has brought about a radical transformation of the security environment for liberal democracies as most of them no longer face a constant threat to their vital interests or even very survival in the form of Soviet Communism.

Furthermore, many of their former foes have now become allies.

In this new environment one country, the United States, is in a special situation. As US Defense Secretary Cohen said recently in the wake of the attack on the USS Cole in the port of Aden: “The United States is a global power with global responsibilities [or interests], and as a result, we face global risks.”¹³

European countries, for their part, no longer have global interests, but regional ones. The threats they now face no longer concern their vital interests, but may nevertheless be very significant. Civil unrest and conflicts in the Balkans, Algeria, the Middle East or Africa have already led, for instance, to a massive and potentially destabilising influx of asylum seekers and a surge in terrorist activities in certain European countries. Furthermore, as European countries tend to integrate, threats to one European country often spill over into neighbouring countries (as when Algerian Islamists planned terrorist attacks in France from the UK, Belgium and Germany and established logistical support in these countries).

These new threats mean that European countries may feel a need to intervene abroad even if their vital interests are not directly at risk. At the same time, as the international environment has now become less confrontational with the end of the East-West rivalry, military interventions abroad – no longer risking to deteriorate into a global conflict – can become a more acceptable, potentially less risky option.

Generally speaking, as dangers no longer concern one country alone, the trend will be for European countries to intervene as part of a coalition, either with other European or NATO countries, or regional powers on other continents.

As military interventions abroad become less risky, public opinions may in turn be less reluctant to accept them, become more receptive to TV pictures and even exert pressure on their leaders to embark on such interventions. This phenomenon has often been described as the “CNN effect”, although the term no longer applies to the impact

of footage from the US news channel only, but to that from all other TV channels carrying news and reporting conflicts and calamities too. The question is often asked now as to whether this “CNN effect” is really playing a role in foreign interventions.

The “CNN effect”: fact of fiction?

The term “CNN effect” has often been used to depict a number of concepts. Prof. Steve Livingston, of George Washington University, said it was “a whole bunch of things. The ‘CNN effect’ can be, in some instances, an acceleration of policy; in other instances, it can be an impediment to policy. In other instances, it’s a dialogue between diplomats taking place instantaneously. At other instances, it’s a dialogue between warring parties...”.¹⁴ He also described it as “a loss of policy control on the part of policy makers because of the power of the media, a power that they can do nothing about”.¹⁵

The latter perception is by and large the most widely accepted but, many observers argue, it is in fact far less significant than is generally assumed. What is misleading is the fact that as a situation in a country or region worsens, it may attract not just increased attention on the part of the media, but on the part of governments too, and decisions taken by the latter may wrongly be attributed to the influence of the media. The “CNN effect” has yet to bring out crowds demanding interventions from their leaders.

If the situation concerns simple cases of humanitarian emergencies (without significant physical threats), governments may decide to intervene in response to (or even in the absence of) widespread media coverage.

On the other hand, if interventions present significant risks for the safety of those involved in them (including forces), governments are usually very cautious, the more so if their countries’ national interests are not directly under threat. It is worth noting, for instance, that since the end of the Vietnam War more US troops were killed by hostile fire in peacekeeping operations in Lebanon and Somalia (285) than in military actions against Iraq, Panama, and Grenada (189).¹⁶ This explains largely Washington’s current cautiousness when having to decide whether or not to commit troops for peacekeeping operations.

The differences between humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping and peace-enforcement operations, the perceived threats to interests and their associated risks are essentially the factors deciding whether a country will intervene militarily or not.

This was the case, for instance, in the first years of the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina when the (NATO) countries involved in the peacekeeping operations did not intervene militarily in spite of extensive TV coverage and often distressing pictures. On the other hand, harrowing TV pictures aired at the time certainly helped policy makers prepare public opinions to the possibility of a military intervention.

Pictures of the shelling of a market in Sarajevo in February 1994, in which dozens of civilians were killed, was instrumental in securing public support for more robust military measures on the part of NATO countries. However, the decision to take these had been made prior to that incident. Although TV pictures may have speeded up the decision they did not provoke it, but the overriding – and misleading – impression at the time was that these actions had been prompted by TV coverage.¹⁷

However, these TV pictures, with others shown before and after, probably contributed a great deal towards securing broad public support in NATO countries when the decision was taken, the following year, to bomb Bosnian Serbs after a similar incident.

In such instances the “CNN effect” can prove a useful tool, not a constraint, on policy makers by helping them prepare the ground for, or accelerate, decisions.

One could also reasonably argue in this case (and later in that of Kosovo) that the national (and collective) interests of NATO countries were increasingly coming under threat as these countries (and NATO itself) appeared indecisive and weak, a perception which called into question their very credibility, and that the decision to intervene was taken for reasons of national (and collective) interests, not as a result of the “CNN effect”.

An incident which is often quoted too is that of the pictures of a dead US Ranger being dragged behind a car in the streets of Mogadishu in October 1993, an incident which is often said to have forced the Clinton administration to withdraw US troops from Somalia. The decision to do so had in fact already been taken well before it. What the TV pictures did was to speed up that process.¹⁸

On the other hand, the “CNN effect” in this latter case is also credited with having deterred a US force from landing in Haiti, in the words of Alvin and Heidi Toffler: “We go into Somalia, we see a dead soldier dragged through the streets on the screens of America, and the world. The next day, practically, Congress says: out of Somalia. And meanwhile in Haiti, Cédras is watching all of that, and he comes to the conclusion that the Americans have no resolve, that they can be easily... Cédras has his goons on the dock, and says, ‘You’re going to have to kill us in order to...’ So that’s what stopped the invasion. And indeed Clinton, in what I regard as one of the stupidest moves, sends a warship off the coast of Haiti and withdraws it because these hundred guys were on the dock – all tracing back to the use of television.”¹⁹

Another example of successful “CNN effect” (although in that instance it should be called the “BBC or ITN effect”) was the decision of British Prime Minister Major and President Bush to commit forces to protect and feed Kurdish refugees in northern Iraq, in what was named “Operation Provide Comfort”, following extensive media coverage of their plight by the BBC and ITN in March-April 1991.

Sometimes, the “CNN effect” is also conveniently used to blame certain events on the media: Israeli security forces officials, for instance, held the media responsible for recent clashes in the West Bank and Gaza, describing them as “CNN Intifada”. The “CNN effect” can indeed have an escalating effect as it may encourage sides to step up their actions to gain extra media coverage.

If anything, these examples show that the “CNN effect” can, *in certain specific cases*, influence foreign and security policies decisions, but that it is far from being the case all the time, although many journalists would probably love to believe that they can unseat dictators and drive foreign policy.

An indisputable consequence of the “CNN effect” is the shortening of the news cycle which forces politicians (and the military) to react immediately to events, often in the absence of an appropriate context or background: they now have to operate in a round-the-clock, real-time, global news environment.

The Haiti episode illustrates another very significant development: players in the international arena – even in non-developed countries – are becoming skilful “media warriors”: they are aware of the technologies, of the potential of the media, of the so-called “CNN effect” and use these to influence public opinions and decision makers or to wage asymmetric struggles against more advanced countries or foes. Demonstrators carrying banners written in English and other languages, obviously intended for foreign audiences, have been a familiar sight in demonstrations throughout the world for years.

Media warriors

More and more players are using the media to advance their cause. They often try to attract attention or support for their cause by using all possible means and services, and the media prove a weapon of choice. They are skilful users of the “CNN effect”.

Governments or political groups often call on PR agencies to put their messages across and to get these through to the media for maximum effect.

A well-known example of this is the televised testimony given by a 15-year old Kuwaiti girl to the Congressional Human Rights Caucus in October 1990. The caucus was simply an association of politicians, not a committee of congress, as such, as a writer on the Gulf war, John MacArthur, observed later: “it is unencumbered by the legal accouterments that would make a witness hesitate before he or she lied... Lying under oath in front of a congressional committee is a crime; lying from under the cover of anonymity to a caucus is merely public relations.”²⁰ In her “testimony” the girl said the following: “I volunteered at the al-Addan hospital... While I was there, I saw the Iraqi soldiers come into the hospital with guns, and into the room where... babies were in incubators. They took the babies out of the incubators, took the incubators, and left the babies on the cold floor to die.” It turned out later that the girl whose name had been kept confidential “to prevent Iraqi reprisals against her family in occupied Kuwait”, was Nayirah al-Sabah, the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador in the USA, and that the testimony was part of a campaign orchestrated by the PR firm Hill & Knowlton, said to have been paid some \$10m by the Kuwaiti government, to influence US elites and public opinion. By the time the ploy was exposed it had played its intended role. In the three months between Nayirah’s testimony and the start of the war, the story of babies torn from their incubators was used as fact by President Bush, in Congress, on TV and at the UN Security Council. “Of all the accusations made against the dictator, none had more impact on American public opinion than the one about Iraqi soldiers removing 312 babies from their incubators and leaving them to die on the cold hospital floors of Kuwait City,” MacArthur observed.

Another similar example is the PR work done by the US public relations company Ruder & Finn Global Public on behalf of the Croat and Bosnian governments. In an interview given to French public TV channel France 2 Deputy Chief Editor Jacques Merlino in October 1993, the director of that company, James Harff, explained bluntly his approach and methods in managing to get three influential US Jewish public organisations behind the Croat and Bosnian governments by associating the Serbs with the Nazis in the public mind after the existence of Serb detention camps had been revealed. “Speed is vital,” he said, “because reports favourable to us must be settled in public opinion. The first statement counts. The retractions have no effect... Our work is not to verify information. We are not equipped for that. Our work is to accelerate the circulation of information favourable to us, to aim at judiciously chosen targets... We are professionals. We had a job to do and we did it. We are not paid to be moral.”²¹ Other PR companies were also contracted during the war, among them Hill & Knowlton, of Gulf War fame, and Waterman & Associates, employed by Croatia.

Political movements and parties, minorities or armed groups are also launching media services in a number of countries to promote their objectives, their reports are often forwarded to foreign media outlets which give them a much wider audience.

In southern Lebanon, for instance, Hezbollah launched its TV channel Al-Manar (“Lighthouse” or “Beacon”) as early as 1991. Hezbollah considers the media as a potent weapon. “We see the media battle as equally important to the fighting on the ground”, Al-Manar general-manager Nayef Krayem told the Reuters news agency in

October 2000. Al-Manar started transmitting via satellite in July 2000 and employs 150 full-time and 100 part-time staff. It occasionally broadcasts in Hebrew and English and has a web site (www.almanar.com.lb).

Al-Manar has been sending units to the front line to film attacks on Israeli and southern Lebanon militia forces for a number of years. After quick editing, the insertion of militant background music and multimedia effects the footage is aired on Lebanese television or on one of the Hezbollah's stations. From there, the pictures reach Israel television, channels in other Arab countries, CNN and other networks. Footage from the channel is even used by Israeli print and electronic media.

According to an Israeli security source who monitors the organisation's activities: "Hezbollah is implementing psychological warfare doctrine in an intensive way."²²

International organisations and NGOs represent another category of players very adept at using the media to achieve their aims, although it would be probably excessive to describe them as "media warriors".

The UN itself believes the media are instrumental in helping it secure the military and logistical support it needs from some of its members. A clear example of that perception was provided in Burundi in July 1996 when the UN secretary-general's spokesperson, Sylvana Foa, speaking on BBC News, urged the international community to act before they saw appalling TV images of slaughter. "Unfortunately, it is not until we see babies being macheted to death on TV, that public opinion forces their governments into action," Ms Foa said, adding: "We do not want to see that this time."²³

However, in spite of the Rwandan precedent, the UN's efforts to put emotional pressure on Western powers to force them to intervene in Burundi by using the media eventually failed. The fact that interests of the powers targeted by the UN were not affected certainly played a major role in their decision.

The importance the UN now attaches to an efficient information policy to deal with crises has been highlighted in a recent "Comprehensive review of peacekeeping operations in all their aspects" for the General Assembly and the Security Council. "An effective public information and communications capacity in mission areas is an operational necessity for virtually all United Nations peace operations," the report says, "it is thus essential that every peace operation formulate public information campaign strategies, particularly for key aspects of a mission's mandate, and that such strategies and the personnel required to implement them be included in the very first elements deployed to help start up a new mission."²⁴

NGOs also make extensive use of the media to further their cause. They know that extensive TV coverage of a conflict or humanitarian catastrophe will attract funds from the public or governments. Their objectives, however, are different from those of the UN or the parties to a conflict. The UN may be seeking military interventions for peace keeping, peace enforcement or humanitarian reasons; warring parties may want it to assert their pre-eminence or ensure their survival, NGOs for their part are more likely to want logistical or financial support to alleviate pressing humanitarian needs.

The pitfalls of media coverage – of zapping viewers and crusading reporters

The media coverage of conflicts is a very sensitive issue as it can influence decisions to intervene abroad or not. In that respect certain features regarding the suitability of the media to exert this influence require some scrutiny.

Many media outlets in certain countries – particularly, but not uniquely in the United States – are driven by commercial interests: channels chase scoops which

mean ratings, which mean, in turn, increased advertising revenues. Generally speaking, foreign issues have a relatively low appeal and rarely attract large ratings. They tend therefore to be ignored or are rarely given the prominence they deserve. As a result of these commercial imperatives public opinions are not properly informed about international issues. The phenomenon was perfectly described by Merlino: “The brevity diktat is a real tragedy. As major channels are competing against each other they judge their performance by one criterion only: audience figures. These are accurate to the minute and everyday we observe the reactions of the public minute by minute. If we are unfortunate enough to note that a three minute report on, let’s say, the history of Yugoslavia which contained archive footage saw 500,000 viewers switch channels as it was slightly dull although necessary, the temptation is great not to broadcast such topics in the future.

“This brevity diktat can be illustrated as follows: the comment from a specialist cannot exceed 50 seconds, the reporting of an event in a foreign country fluctuates between 60 and 75 seconds, a (foreign) report is long from two minutes and 15 seconds, it becomes impossible to broadcast if it’s over four minutes... The enemy is not disinformation, half information or truncated information, the enemy is the zapping viewer. A strange rule has become imperative for all editors in chief... it was put to me in the following words by a director of CBS in the United States: “you must flip subjects before viewers flip channels”... this is especially dangerous as it excludes any nuance, any reflection, any standing back. It forces to oversimplify what is not simple... in one word this diktat prevents reasoning, and by preventing reasoning it steers the media exclusively towards the pursuit of emotions.”²⁵

The relatively low interest in foreign news shown by many networks and newspapers has been highlighted by the fact that these have now closed down most of their foreign operations and employ fewer and fewer reporters or permanent correspondents abroad. As a result the quality of the coverage of foreign news has suffered. The same observations applies to the coverage of defence issues, a very specialised sphere, now reported by very few experts only, or non-specialists. This has a detrimental effect on the quality of the coverage of defence issues particularly at times of conflicts, as was obvious during the 1999 Kosovo conflict. These inadequacies have been noted by a number of specialist defence correspondents in the UK and the USA, in particular.

Mark Laity, a former BBC defence correspondent, now with NATO’s public information department, noted the following about the media coverage of the Kosovo crisis from NATO, in Brussels: “There was some very sloppy writing in the aftermath about how all the media defence experts in Brussels had been misled, but they were experts on the Common Agricultural Policy. They were EU [European Union] reporters in the main. The number of defence correspondents there was about three and two of those were BBC. The Americans brought in people, Michael Gordon from ‘*The Washington Post*’, for instance, but the amount of expertise was very limited... It had a reflection not just on their analysis but also on their limited contact. They were extremely reliant on public information... The media lost out very badly...”²⁶

‘*The New York Times*’ Washington bureau chief, R.W. Apple Jr. made similar comments in 1994: “One of the problems in the Persian Gulf – the biggest problem – was that most of the journalists knew nothing about military affairs. There were very few people there who had ever covered a war before. And surprisingly few who had even ever covered the Pentagon. That’s a hopeless situation.”²⁷

This absence of expertise is acknowledged by politicians too. Former US Defense Secretary Les Aspin noted the impact of the lack of interest in defence and foreign issues on press coverage in 1995: "... you've probably got less sophistication in the press corps about the military. There's nothing like a crisis that brings out a whole bunch of people who have never covered anything before. These things go through cycles. We happen to be in a cycle now where foreign policy and, therefore, our defense, and any national security issue is low on the interest poll."²⁸

This lack of interest and expertise means that the quality of the coverage of foreign and defence issues has suffered, and that ultimately the public tend to rely primarily on TV pictures to be informed about these.

Another factor influencing the coverage of conflicts is the natural tendency of journalists reporting them to feel empathy for one side and the tendency of some – consciously or not – to convey their feelings to the public. This phenomenon is more manifest when civilian populations are particularly suffering. It is even openly advocated by some journalists, one of them, former BBC foreign affairs correspondent, Martin Bell (who covered the war in Bosnia where he was wounded), now a member of parliament, even coined the term "journalism of attachment" to describe it. "The case for intervention is not to help one side against another, but the weak against the strong, the armed against the unarmed; to take the side of the everyday victims of war who, until now, have had no protection. It is really a question, finally, of whether we care," Bell wrote in his book "In Harm's Way".²⁹

Although it is natural for journalists not to remain indifferent to the suffering they witness, bias in reporting or taking side openly can have serious adverse consequences for the overall credibility of the media in conflict reporting. This was most obvious in Bosnia-Herzegovina and denounced by a number of NATO officers and other officials.³⁰

Government, the military and the media: uneasy relationships

All conflicts involve three central players – government, the military and the media – every single one needs the other two, but for very different reasons. As a result, their relationship is not an easy one and often leads to a lot of frictions between them.

Governments media priorities

Having the responsibility to decide to intervene abroad and possibly commit the country's forces to combat, governments in liberal democracies use the media to convey their policies and to seek and sustain public support for these. This approach in fact differs little from their normal dealings with the press regarding domestic issues.

The main difficulties faced by governments in their relationship with the media at times of international crises are mostly connected with the shortened news cycle, and the need to respond to the "CNN effect" (or make the best use of it). The political agenda in dealing with the media may also clash with military priorities: politicians often seek maximum media exposure and swift response, an approach rarely compatible with military priorities – essentially based on secrecy, or even deception and disinformation, and slow disclosure of information – at times of conflict or even in peacetime.

Furthermore, politicians in liberal democracies, which should know better tend, at times of conflict, to interfere and behave in a heavy-handed manner with the press

often at the risk of antagonising the latter. Recent examples of this behaviour were given in the 1999 conflict when the BBC came under severe criticism from a number of British officials for “negative reporting”. John Simpson, a senior BBC foreign correspondent and veteran of some 30 wars and revolutions, who was reporting the war from Belgrade at the time, was the main target of these attacks. Simpson replied that his job would be easier, if the British government stopped interfering.³¹ Official criticisms of the BBC coverage of the war sparked off an intense debate in the British press.³²

Military-media relationship: the clash of two cultures

By definition the priorities of the media and of the military are often at odds. The attitudes, philosophies and approaches of the two worlds are opposed in many respects and cause misunderstandings and frictions.

The military is by definition hierarchical and as such, does not – and cannot – function along democratic lines, it is not very open to the outside world having to operate in a somewhat autonomous way; its various services and units must act in a cooperative manner to achieve maximum efficiency and success; it is often rather monolithic and places a great deal of importance on secrecy and the control of information for obvious reasons of security. On the other hand the military needs a certain degree of press coverage to maintain public support both in peacetime and when it is engaged in military interventions, yet it often blames the media when things go wrong.

By contrast the press is mostly opposed to authority and control, its main business is to seek and disclose information, as much as possible and swiftly. Journalists are often not familiar with military culture, and in some countries frequently hostile to the military, to a certain extent; they thrive in an individualistic, competitive environment rather than in a collaborative, collective one: getting the news out is more important for them than protecting operational safety. Journalists are also wary of being used by the military (and government) to convey propaganda and disinformation. They are, however, also very dependent on the military for information at times of conflict and cannot therefore afford to be too hostile.

The press is sensitive to efforts by the military to manipulate it or to mislead it. A disturbing episode took place during the Kosovo conflict, but became known long after the conflict had ended: two leading US news channels, CNN and National Public Radio (NPR), admitted having allowed psychological operations officers from the US military to work as placement interns.³³

Both military and media have a time-sensitive – but conflicting – approach to information: the military is reluctant to release quickly information which could jeopardise operational safety. For the press speed is vital: old news is no news, especially in today’s real-time global media environment.

Furthermore to operate efficiently the military must rely fully on a cooperative approach

Because of these differences relations between the press and the military can be awkward and often even tense.

The military is conscious that information – taken in a very broad sense – is vital to the conduct of war, the US military is taking the view that it must operate within a global information environment.

The US armed forces are increasingly giving a pivotal role to information (seen as a “force enabler”) in the conduct of their operations, a trend observed and followed, to a certain extent and with some delay, by armed forces in many other countries.

For the military, information concern mainly the established domains of Command, Control, Communications, Computers and Intelligence which are at the core of Information Warfare (IW), both of an offensive and defensive nature. In Joint Vision 2020, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff “conceptual template” outlining the way US armed forces plan to deal with conflicts in the early 21st century, IW is thus given special importance. Its aim is to help achieve “Full Spectrum Dominance” through “Information Denial”, “Information Control”, “Information Dominance” and “Information Supremacy”.³⁴ The military is also increasingly giving more importance to the media environment, that of the enemy – which they target with psychological operations, Psyop (which may include the use of special broadcasts, disinformation, leaflets, etc.) – and that of their own side which they address through Public Affairs Officers and special media programmes.

Military management of the press on the battlefield

The Vietnam experience has durably influenced the way the military – not just in the USA – deals with the press at times of conflict.

The various military establishments tend to deal differently with the media at times of crises according to their own experience – and to that of others. The current tendency is to try to control, to a certain extent, the media during conflicts.

In Vietnam extensive and almost unrestricted media access to the whole theatre of operations allowed wide-ranging coverage of the war, bringing the fighting to US homes. Initial positive coverage gradually turned against the US involvement, in particular after the 1968 Tet offensive.

Many in the US military establishment had the feeling that the press had betrayed the military during Vietnam. This feeling survived for a long time after Vietnam, as a retired USMC Lieutenant-General and journalist, Bernard E. Trainor, observed in 1990 when he wrote: “The credo of the military seems to have become ‘duty, honor, country, and hate the media’.”³⁵

Since Vietnam the US military has never allowed the press the same degree of access to the battlefield it had enjoyed before. However, the relationship between the two can no longer be described as hostile, probably due to the fact that US military operations since Vietnam have been rather successful.

Following Operation Urgent Fury in October 1983, when US forces invaded Grenada and no US journalist was able to report first-hand for two and a half days after the invasion, and ensuing complaints from the press (and consultation with media organisations), the Pentagon launched a review of the rules governing press access to the battlefield. It set up the Department of Defense News Media Pool (DoDNMP).

In the pool system, representative journalists are included in the pool and their reports are made available to the rest of the media. Many journalists resent this system as it greatly restricted their access to the battlefield, and as the military can control what the pool reporters can cover.

The British MoD had set up a similar system (which may very well have inspired the Pentagon) during the 1982 Falklands War, when journalists were only allowed to cover the war as part of a pool tightly controlled by the British military. Initially the British press was told no journalist would be allowed to join the Task Force, faced

with protests the MoD told the media six journalists only could sail, a number later increased to 12 and eventually to 29.³⁶ During the whole operation, the journalists were under the supervision of six MoD (civilian) public relations officers, or “minders” as they became known, and totally dependent on the Royal Navy for transport and for filing their reports – submitted to local military censorship – back to London.³⁷ Efforts to control media coverage later came under close scrutiny and some criticism from the House of Commons Defence Committee which investigated it.³⁸

The media pool system was applied in “Operation Just Cause”, the US invasion of Panama in December 1989, and proved a total failure with pool journalists arriving too late, being delayed by briefings from US officials and unable to report the first day of fighting, whilst journalists already present in Panama were prevented from working to protect the privileges of the pool.

The Gulf War presented another opportunity for the US military to apply the pool system. This did make sense in view of the nature of the conflict fought over large tracks of desert, of the geo-political situation – Saudi Arabia not being used to the presence of foreign journalists even in small number – and of the need to limit the interference of a large number of journalists in military operations. The pool system in Operation Desert Storm was criticised for serving one purpose only: ensuring total control by the US military over press coverage. Furthermore, the international press had almost no access (with the exception of British and French journalists who could work with their respective military contingents) as one pool slot only was given to the entire international contingent of the press and one slot to the Saudi media. This made international coverage heavily dependent on US sources for video.³⁹

The pool system, however, makes sense for the military if one considers the ever growing number of journalists covering conflicts in which Western forces are involved: 461 reporters were accredited with Eisenhower’s Supreme Headquarters, but only 27 took part in the Normandy landing on D-Day; some 400 journalists were in Vietnam with a maximum of 47 deployed in the field during the 1968 Tet offensive⁴⁰; 1,600 journalists and media support crew were in Saudi Arabia to cover Operation Desert Storm; “Operation Allied Force” saw 350 journalists covering the operation from NATO headquarters in Brussels, and hundreds more reporting from Albania, Macedonia and Italy.

The difficulty facing the military in dealing with the media in today’s military operations was well described by the ‘Daily Telegraph’ correspondent in Macedonia on 12 June 1999: “Military commanders were struggling yesterday to come up with a plan to cope with the media circus that will cavalcade over the Kosovo border after the troops go in. More than 1,000 journalists have been given NATO accreditation in Macedonia alone and most will have drivers and translators accompanying them. All of them aim to be first across the border with some even hiring mopeds to dash through the traffic. At the same time, the military convoy that will go over the border is expected to number 3,000 heavy vehicles which will move along the highway at speeds of around 40mph... NATO fears there could be a spate of accidents along the road which will slow down the military advance... they worry that media cars and vans could try to pass slow military vehicles and if they go off the metalled roads they could hit mines. Casualties will not only need treatment and evacuation which will again slow down the advance but will also be very bad public relations for NATO.”⁴¹

The 1999 Kosovo conflict, which was described as “the first media war” has been marked by a new dimension in the relationship between government, the military and

the press and is bound to have a very significant influence in the way these players interact in future military interventions, not just in liberal democracies but elsewhere too.

The Kosovo conflict: The first media war?

When NATO forces launched air strikes on Yugoslavia on 24 March 1999, Washington and other NATO capitals expected these would soon force the regime in Belgrade to give in to their demands. A number of Western leaders – including NATO Secretary-General Javier Solana, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and others, spoke of a campaign lasting days only. These assumptions based on NATO's past experience in Bosnia-Herzegovina proved erroneous as the campaign was to last for 78 days, soon leaving a NATO Press and Media Service too overstretched to cope fully with the demands of such a protracted campaign.

The Gulf War has often been described as “the first information war”. The term is misleading as information often mainly means media for many, but not for the military.

What the military meant by information war was that the prime target in the Gulf War was the Iraqi military and political information structure. As a US officer put it later: “it was the first information war. Not that information hasn't always been a key element of war... But the use of information was serendipitous. If it was there and if it was correct, it was used. Information war uses information in a very fundamental way... Information was a target... It was the first war with a notion that an enemy could be brought to his knees by denial of information. It was actually tested and proven on the battlefield.”⁴²

The Gulf War was also the first war where a TV channel, CNN, provided round-the-clock live coverage from an “enemy” capital. CNN reporters were joined later by colleagues from other media outlets from countries at war with Iraq who provided coverage from Baghdad too. The media were used by both sides to advance their aims.

The Kosovo conflict however was truly the “first media war” because it was the first conflict to be the object of real-time, global, round-the-clock coverage, the first in which the media, were treated as both target and weapon to such an extent, the first in which the Internet was used extensively and also the first in which “news management” played such a vital role in deciding the outcome. Both sides used the media to maintain domestic and foreign public support for their actions, whilst trying to undermine the other side's positions.

The media as a target

Considering Yugoslav domestic media a major instrument of internal control and propaganda, NATO subjected Yugoslav broadcasting installations, mainly transmitters and antennas, to intense and sustained attacks from the very beginning until the very end of the air campaign. These attacks were carried out under the credible reason that these installations had a dual military-civilian use.

TV broadcasts from the state broadcaster, Radio Television Serbia (RTS), suffered serious disruption and were even totally blacked out on 5 April after aerials and transmitters came under heavy NATO bombardments.

The intensity of the onslaught can be measured by the fact that near the end of the air campaign Serbian Information Minister Aleksandar Vucic announced that NATO had fired more than 1,000 missiles at Serbian state and private media facilities,

causing damage well in excess of \$1.1bn. Radio Television Serbia had sustained the greatest damage, its buildings in Belgrade, Novi Sad and Pristina having been hit, and 17 out of its 19 transmitters destroyed. Vucic stressed however, that “the aggressor failed in its intention to silence the Serbian media within just a few days”.⁴³

A Belgrade building housing private TV Pink, BK TV and TV Kosova, the latter a station owned by President Milosevic’s daughter, Marija, was bombed, but the most controversial attack against Serbian media installations was the one on Belgrade’s RTS building on 21 April, 16 members of staff were killed in the raid – the only Serb media workers killed during the conflict. Indications are that Yugoslav officials knew the RTS building was to be attacked soon and deliberately decided not to order staff to leave to use probable casualties as a propaganda coup, which it was at the time.⁴⁴ In a message to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) less than 10 days before the attack, NATO had stated that “Allied Force targets military targets only, and television and radio towers are only struck if they are integrated into military facilities, as they often are in Yugoslavia. There is no policy to strike television and radio transmitters as such. The Alliance shares your concern for freedom of the media and the treatment of journalists. Allied air missions are planned to avoid civilian casualties, including of course journalists.”⁴⁵

The attack was seen by many observers in NATO countries as a blunder and was severely condemned by press outlets and international media bodies such as Reporters Sans Frontières, the IFJ and the EBU (European Broadcasting Union) which expressed its concern “about any attempts to limit the rights of audiences to full news services, whether through censorship, distortion of news or destruction of the means to exchange news.”

Another step taken by NATO countries to silence Serb state media was the ban imposed by Eutelsat on RTS satellite retransmissions after more than eight weeks of air strikes.

NATO also used jamming and broadcasts from aircraft and neighbouring countries to disrupt Yugoslav broadcast media. The Yugoslav deputy federal minister for telecommunications, Svetozar Simovic, declared after the conflict, that over 400 attempts by the aggressor to replace Yugoslav programmes with their own broadcasts from Romania, Hungary, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania had been recorded. “The ‘Allied Voice of NATO’ and the United Voice of NATO, tried to push their propaganda by usurping 11 radio stations and two TV channels, but we managed to stop them by taking effective actions,” he said.⁴⁶

In the first week of April US psyop units started radio and TV broadcasts in Serbian from Commando Solo aircraft. The broadcasts identifying themselves as Allied Voice Radio and Television were aimed at counteracting the Belgrade authorities’ control of the local media, it was announced. The effectiveness of the programmes, broadcast “in very poor Serbian” according to a Serbian newspaper, was very limited.

US forces had previously used the aircraft, converted C-130s equipped to jam radio and TV broadcasts and to replace them with their own programmes, in Grenada, the Gulf War, Somalia, Haiti and Bosnia.⁴⁷

The distribution of newspapers was hampered by damage to the road and rail networks more than by anything else. The sole newsprint plant in Serbia, Matroz, didn’t come under attack and Belgrade gave orders to allocate newsprint to Hungarian-language on a priority basis to uphold the support of the Hungarian minority in the country.⁴⁸

In contrast to NATO, Belgrade had no possibility of threatening physically media outlets in NATO countries, especially those which it considered as particularly hostile or dangerous. Its only priority was to try to protect its media assets as best as it could and make the best use of them.

The media as a weapon

Both camps used the media as a weapon to uphold support at home, undermine the other side and gain the backing of public opinions in countries not involved in the conflict. To get their message across they used domestic and international radio and television broadcasting and, for the first time, the Internet.

Most people nowadays rely on television and radio for their news and governments on both sides tried to make the best use of them. The situations were very different since Western governments were dealing with a multitude of independent outlets whilst their Serbian counterpart had imposed a very tight control on the domestic press for a long time. Yugoslav journalists could freely report from Western capitals whilst all foreign journalists were under close watch and could not file freely from Yugoslavia, that is, mainly Serbia. Many were initially deported, before being allowed to return, equipment – satellite dishes, satphones, recording equipment – was often confiscated; several more journalists – including Russian TV crews from Russian Public TV, ORT, and the independent NTV company – were deported later during the conflict. Foreign journalists were being closely watched and taken on tours to be shown the damage to individual and civilian installations which would, the Belgrade regime hoped, help undermine public support for the intervention when shown abroad.

The Internet was also used by both camps to get their message across and was used by many as a source for additional information on the conflict.

The independent Belgrade radio station B92 was taken off the air by the Belgrade authorities the day the air strikes started, within a few hours it was back on air via satellite and the Internet. The European Union immediately offered free satellite slots to independent Yugoslav broadcasters in response to the ban on B92.⁴⁹

International broadcasting

International broadcasting was used extensively and, for the first time, in a coordinated manner, by NATO countries to influence Yugoslav public opinion and foreign audiences in other countries. As in previous conflicts elsewhere, the main western international broadcasters, the BBC, Deutsche Welle (DW), Radio France Internationale (RFI), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) and VOA, stepped up their shortwave and mediumwave output to the region, and used local FM transmitters in neighbouring countries in Albania, Bosnia, Croatia and Macedonia to reach Kosovar refugees and Serbs.

RFE/RL launched a daily service in Kosovian-Albanian, the Albanian spoken in the Kosovo region of Serbia, on 1 March. The US Broadcasting Board of Governors, which oversees RFE/RL and VOA, announced on 8 April that it would “surround Serbia with FM transmitters” to broadcast around the clock RFE/RL South Slavic Service, which is a combination of Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian, plus VOA programmes in Serbian, Bosnian, Albanian and English.

The BBC World Service too expanded its output to the region, as it normally does at times of crisis. After the conflict the cost of these extended new services to the region was set at £392,815 (nearly a quarter of the £1,611,284 in additional expenditures incurred by the Foreign Office in connection with the Kosovo conflict).⁵⁰

DW expanded its daily Albanian output to four hours and its Serbian output to three hours and 45 minutes on 1 April, and expanded its services to the Balkans again in early May.

RFI stepped up its broadcasts in Serbo-Croat and Albanians and embarked on a comprehensive local FM rebroadcasting programme in Albania for Montenegro and Kosovo in early May.

For its part, the Voice of Russia launched a special two-hour daily news programme in Russian, Serbo-Croat, English, German, French and Albanian for Yugoslavia in early April and expanded its daily output in Serbian from one and a half hour in late March to four hours 50 minutes in late April. It placed a Kosovo link on its web site in English carrying a special appeal to NATO soldiers reminding them that their “bombs and missiles turn Easter into a nightmare for men, women and children of Yugoslavia.”⁵¹

With a 1998 survey indicating that some 12 per cent of Serbian households had access to satellite television international news channels such as BBC World, CNN, DW-tv or Sky News also reached a substantial number of viewers. Some Yugoslav viewers were also able to tune in to TV channels in neighbouring countries, Croatia, Macedonia, Romania or Hungary.

Yugoslavia’s main tools to reach foreign audiences were its external shortwave service, which was badly affected by NATO air strikes against transmitters, and its TV pictures available to foreign channels via satellite for rebroadcast. This outlet too became unavailable after Eutelsat imposed a ban on RTS rebroadcasts via satellite. Although Western countries used external radio and TV broadcasting very extensively it is difficult to assess exactly the impact these had on Serb public opinion. Reactions on the part of Yugoslav officials who kept attacking “NATO’s propaganda war” would suggest they were definitely perceived as a distinct threat.

These broadcasts proved very useful to Kosovars, to refugees in particular and helped reunite, through special programmes, thousands of people separated by the conflict.

Internet

The Kosovo conflict was also the first major conflict fought on the Internet. Both sides and third parties too launched special web sites or expanded existing ones.⁵²

NATO’s own web site carried press releases and transcripts of official speeches, displayed maps, aerial views of targets “post- and pre-strikes”, photographs and video footage of actual attacks.

The British MoD site had pages in Serbian as well as English, giving background to the crisis and the balance of forces, news about the operations and pictures. The MoD Press Office noted after the conflict that “the increased use of the Internet was the single biggest innovation of the media campaign.” The joint MoD/FCO web site was regarded as “an enormous success”, receiving some 7.5 million hits during the campaign, of which three millions were from the USA and some 50,000 from the FRY.⁵³

The official US DoD web site offered live broadcasts from daily briefings at the Pentagon and daily and background information about the campaign.

Foreign and Defence Ministries in other NATO countries also placed information about the conflict and national policies on their web sites.

The Yugoslav Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Serbia’s Ministry of Information had their own news sites, giving details of the NATO attacks, carrying news, discussion and other information. Other Serbian sites also carried explicit pictures of casualties.

Web sites were the targets of attacks too with the NATO web site blocked by thousands of e-mails sent from Serbia. Several “hacking” incidents against official sites from NATO countries were also reported.

Although the Internet was not a major factor in the Kosovo media war it made its first apparition in a major conflict, and it is likely to play a more significant role in future conflicts.

Western news management in the Kosovo conflict – the key to victory

From the beginning of the conflict effective news management was vital for both sides in order to maintain domestic public support for the campaign and win foreign backing. Domestically the task was easier, in a way, for the Belgrade regime than for NATO: the former exerted strict control over its media and was able to get its message across without opposition, the latter, being an alliance of 19 sovereign countries – often with completely different if not totally opposed views of the conflict and in which free media played an important role – could not adopt a rigid approach in its dealings with the press.

News management for the NATO alliance was implemented at both the alliance and national levels.

NATO's news management

Hopes within NATO that the Belgrade regime would cave in after a few days of air strikes proved unfounded and caught the alliance and its small Press and Media Service of just six without a clear strategy, unprepared for a protracted campaign, forced to improvise constantly and to rely nearly entirely on its spokesman, Jamie Shea. The fact that the campaign didn't result initially in any major mishap for NATO in the form of either allied casualties or a major incident of “collateral damage” and large civilian deaths certainly helped maintain a façade of normality to NATO's media operations for the public at least, if not for attentive observers.

NATO's main ally in the media campaign at the time was probably the Milosevic regime which, by forcing tens of thousands of refugees to flee across the borders of neighbouring countries, strengthened public support for the air campaign in most countries of the alliance and helped NATO and Western leaders demonise the leaders in Belgrade.

The air campaign posed a major problem for the media, particularly television, as it didn't offer them pictures, which in today's picture-led media environment means no news. Therefore they were left to focus mainly on the air campaign, and when these happened on the alliance's blunders.

The NATO media machine suffered a major setback in mid-April when a convoy of refugees was caught in a NATO air strike near Djakovica, some 10-20 people were killed according to NATO, 75 according to the Serbs. Belgrade used the incident and took foreign journalists to the scene of the attack to report. This also proved that he, who controls the ground, controls the pictures: Belgrade was thus able to control what could be shown to the world: hence no pictures of refugees fleeing, of Serb security forces setting houses alight or shooting civilians.

NATO had been expecting such an incident as Jamie Shea later said: “All of us were fearing of the first time when we would have this instance of the dreaded term ‘collateral damage’, an act in which civilians would be harmed and that ultimately this was going to be the big test.”⁵⁴

It took NATO five days to come up with an explanation, a delay and confusion which seriously dented its credibility and public support for the air campaign throughout NATO countries, as opinion polls clearly indicated at the time. Another instance of “collateral damage” which reportedly killed 55 passengers of a train which came under air attack reinforced the trend. Had such incidents happened at the very beginning of the campaign they would undoubtedly have had a much greater negative impact on Western public opinions.

British Prime Minister Blair dispatched his press secretary, Alastair Campbell, to Brussels where he spent several days advising NATO on revamping its media operations. NATO media operations were reinforced with officials sent from the major capitals and the news management operation became much more efficient.

This, however, left the impression that NATO did not have its own media policy and resulted in headlines such as “Blair takes the PR war to NATO HQ”, or “NATO sends for Campbell”.

Jamie Shea explained later NATO’s media strategy: “Part of being convincing is to saturate the airwaves. Our credo at NATO was just to be on the air the whole time, crowd out the opposition, give every interview, do every briefing... We occupied the whole day with our information. And the more we did, the less the media put on talking heads and others who could be nullifying our effort... It is essential to keep the media permanently occupied and supplied with fresh information to report on. That way they are less inclined to go in search of critical stories..”⁵⁵

NATO was accused during and after the war of having deliberately misled the press by giving inflated figures regarding the number of Kosovars killed by Yugoslav security forces and the damage inflicted on Yugoslav forces. NATO had said that 100,000 Kosovars were missing, not that they had been killed. Given the scale of the atrocities committed in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in Srebrenica in particular, it is understandable that some of the figures may have been inflated, this however does not necessarily imply bad faith or a deliberate intention to mislead on the part of NATO.

The errors concerning the effectiveness of air strikes on Yugoslav forces on the other hand could indicate serious shortcomings in NATO’s battle damage assessment procedures, more than a deliberate attempt to misinform.

In spite of all its shortcomings NATO’s news management achieved its main objective which was to uphold public support for the campaign. The main lesson for NATO from this experience is that one can no longer improvise a media strategy in the middle of a military intervention: one must have one before the intervention itself starts.

European news management in Kosovo: The British experience

The British way of handling the media in a modern conflict can be traced back to the Falklands War where the MoD news management at the time was described recently as a “rather pathetic endeavour... seen to be grossly inadequate.”⁵⁶

The UK played a leading role in the overall alliance media campaign, much more significant than the one it played in the military operations, “rescuing” the NATO media operation in the process. As one MoD civilian said at the time: “Britain’s military role in the campaign is quite small, but we have taken a major share of the media campaign and this has increased perceptions of our role and importance.”⁵⁷

According to the MoD, the UK media operations campaign had four key target audiences: the UK public; NATO allies; Kosovo Albanians; Milosevic and his supporters; a further target audience was described as British military morale.

The “centrepiece of the media operation” was the daily London press conference, convened jointly by MoD, the FCO and the Department for International Development, which was held every day at 11.30 “in order to fit into the 24 hour news cycle (and influence the American channels)”.

Much of the shortcomings in the British media operations like in those of NATO, can be attributed to “the lack of resourcing [which] may have been [due to] the hope that this campaign would only last a few days. When Milosevic did not capitulate, structures in place came under strain.”

Three main constraints were identified in the conduct of the media operation, all directly linked to the Global Media Environment: “The 24-hour news cycle, which required frequent updates, especially on TV, radio and the Internet”; “The speed of global media dissemination [which] forced the MoD to operate in a global environment. Messages therefore had to be coordinated between the Balkan region, Brussels, London and Washington to ensure that the media received a consistent line and ‘updates’ to the story”; “The decline of specialist defence reporters across many of the media which was both a problem and an opportunity for the MoD”.⁵⁸

Once allied troops entered Kosovo the MoD used the pool system to manage the media, an approach which, as usual, is not popular with journalists who find it too slow and restrictive. The professionalism of military public information and escort officers was praised by journalists.

However, the British government was accused by senior MoD officials of allowing its media campaign “to take precedence over military considerations”. One officer was quoted as saying: “There is a perception that the military area is becoming something of a side-show to the presentational side.”⁵⁹

Overall, the MoD media campaign was very effective in achieving its objectives and in making a very effective contribution to the alliance’s news management effort. This was no significant achievement considering that public opinion at home and abroad was a key element in determining the outcome.

European news management in Kosovo: The French experience.

In the recent past relations between the French military and the press have rarely been excellent. The French military viewed the media with a certain degree of suspicion, a feeling returned by the press.

The 1991 Gulf War provoked a certain change in attitude and although the 1994 Defence White Book mentioned briefly only the role of the media and public opinion the French defence establishment has made significant efforts since to raise its profile and public awareness of the country’s armed forces.

During the Kosovo crisis the official information and communication campaign was mainly targeting French and European public opinions with very little effort being made to target Serb public opinion. The campaign was co-ordinated under the aegis of the spokespersons for the Presidency and Prime Minister’s Office and was carried out in close cooperation with other countries and NATO. The defence ministry information campaign was the responsibility of the D el egation   l’Information et   la Communication de la D efense (DICOD).

Full coordination with NATO’s communication unit was only achieved after the dispatch to this unit in the wake of its reorganisation following the Djakovica incident, of two French diplomats and two officers.

The French Defence Ministry public affairs campaign had three main objectives: strengthen France credibility within the alliance; allow French public opinion to

understand the country's policies; emphasise the competence and expertise of the nation's armed forces. The effort was very significant:

The DICOD issued 104 press releases, sent each to 233 newsrooms; it satisfied 1,600 media requests for reports, handled 4,000 telephone queries from French and foreign media outlets, organised 14 tours for the press, in France Italy and on board the Foch aircraft carrier, offered transport on military flights to and inside Macedonia and Albania. It also organised 18 press briefings for a total of 368 media outlets and 533 journalists.

French Defence Minister Alain Richard, for his part, gave 12 press briefings (one of these live with his British counterpart), 15 TV interviews, 11 radio interviews and 12 interviews for French and foreign newspapers.

This effort certainly helped maintain public support for the government's and NATO's policies throughout the conflict.

A post-mortem of the media campaign highlighted a number of shortcomings: the campaign was found to have been too "reactive", not proactive enough; individual services were not given the opportunity to make a separate and valuable contribution to the overall effort; the campaign did not give enough importance to foreign media outlets, particularly those from English-speaking countries.⁶⁰

Further to its public affairs role the DICOD was also closely associated with the decision-making process as the deputy head of the DICOD media department, Col Jehan-Eric Winckler, told Télévision Suisse Romande at the time: "we are now clearly associated to all decisions from the start. This is the great novelty. Before we had a role of experts, now I would claim that we have an important say because the general staff realised that communication, like signals, engineers, artillery, is a weapon in its own right..."⁶¹

The French communication and public affairs campaign during the Kosovo conflict, and its military component in particular was successful overall and marked a break with the rather poor record of the country in that domain in the past. The campaign was well co-ordinated with that of other countries and of NATO, as such it made a significant contribution to the eventual outcome of the conflict

Lessons

A number of lessons can be drawn from this (too) brief roundup of the media dimension in military interventions, these can be summarised as follows:

- A Global Media Environment has emerged from the information and media revolutions.
- This Global Media Environment has a significant impact on the new international environment by shortening the news cycle and forcing decision makers to react rapidly.
- The so-called "CNN effect" has a certain impact on the conduct of foreign policy, but it is not as far-reaching as many claim.
- Public opinions are more fickle than ever and must be the target of a comprehensive information effort to allow policy makers and the military to achieve their objectives, even short-term ones.
- An ever greater number of players on the international scene – governments, lobby groups, terrorist organisations, etc – are becoming skilful "media warriors" and will use

the media as an equaliser in an asymmetric struggle with more powerful adversaries.

- Decision makers and the military alike must integrate a media strategy in their overall strategy.

In many countries, signs are now apparent that both decision-makers and the military are becoming aware of the importance of the media dimension in military interventions. In Russia, for instance, senior officials publicly acknowledged that they had totally lost the information war - and public support - in the First Chechen War (1994-1996), when independent television channels, such as NTV, highlighted Russian setbacks and heavy casualties. Drawing the lessons of this defeat as they launched their second campaign in Chechnya in 1999, the Russian government and military sought to manage the news agenda, setting up a special public information unit and strictly controlling media access to Chechnya and reporting of the conflict. As a Russian general said in January 2000: “There are two wars going on – the actual hostilities and an information war.”⁶²

In view of the growing media dimension in recent military interventions the post-Vietnam hostile approach to the media on the part of the military, as illustrated in the “*duty, honor, country and hate the media*” formula, is bound to change to a more positive ‘*think media - win the war*’.

Notes:

¹ “How the war was spun”: BBC World TV, 10 June 2000

² “OTAN – ‘Questions sur une guerre humanitaire’ – Temps Présent”; Télévision Suisse Romande, juin 1999

³ “The Kosovo Crisis and the media: Reflections of a NATO spokesman”, Jamie Shea, Address to the Summer Forum on Kosovo organised by the Atlantic Council of the United Kingdom and the Trades Union Committee for European and Transatlantic Understanding, London, 15 July 1999

⁴ “The 2000 Armed Conflicts Report”, March, 2000, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

⁵ During the Cold War period military interventions abroad were mainly carried out by very few countries only, fighting colonial wars or defending global or regional interests. In the 1990’s many other countries have deployed troops in combat and conflict situations abroad – not just as part of a UN observer mission. Pilots from Canada, Denmark, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain have flown combat missions in the Kosovo conflict; Poland sent troops in peacekeeping and peace-enforcement missions in Haiti, Bosnia and Kosovo, and committed special forces to ensure the close protection of senior US commanders in Haiti and to take part in the arrest of suspected war criminals in Bosnia; Italy and Greece sent troops to Albania in 1997; Australia deployed forces in East Timor in 1999 as part of its leading role in the international peace-keeping effort in that territory; etc.

⁶ ‘Via Satellite’, Philips Business Information Inc., June 1996 - July 2000

⁷ “Med TV: ‘Kurdistan in the sky’”, 23 March 1999; “Kurdish stations keep diaspora in touch”, 16 February 1999; Peter Feuilherade, BBC News Online

⁸ UNESCO 1999 Yearbook. pp. IV-8 – IV-10

⁹ “Powershift: knowledge, wealth and violence at the edge of the 21st century”, Alvin Toffler, Bantam Books, N.Y., November 1990, pp. 350-352.

¹⁰ The American newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst played a decisive role in triggering off the Spanish-American war of 1898 through a campaign in his newspapers, particularly the ‘New York Journal’ throughout 1897 and the first half of 1898; the message he was said to have sent at the time to Frederic Remington (an artist working for his

newspapers in Havana): “You furnish the pictures and I furnish the war”, is often quoted to stress the influence of the media in international politics.

¹¹ ‘Montreal Gazette’, 16 May 1975

¹² Morand Fachot: “Media in zones of conflicts”. Background survey, updated May 2000, available on Radio Netherlands web site: <http://www.rnw.nl/realradio/dossiers/index.html>; and in English and French - on Fondation Hironnelle web site at: <http://www.hironnelle.org>

¹³ DoD news briefing 12 October 2000

¹⁴ Prof. Steven Livingston quoted in “The CNN Effect: TV and Foreign Policy”, America’s Defense Monitor, (Center for Defense Information, 1995).

¹⁵ Prof. Steven Livingston, quoted in “The CNN Effect”, by Warren Strobel in ‘American Journalism Review’, May 1996.

¹⁶ “Lessons from the war in Kosovo”, James Phillips, James Anderson, Heritage Foundation Backgrounder, 22 July 1999; Worldwide U.S. Active Duty Military Deaths in Selected Military Operations: <http://web1.whs.osd.mil/mmid/casualty/table13.htm>

¹⁷ “The CNN Effect”, Warren Strobel, in ‘American Journalism Review’, May 1996.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Alvin and Heidi Toffler in: “Horizon: The I-Bomb”, BBC Television, 1997

²⁰ John MacArthur: “Second Front. Censorship and Propaganda in the Gulf War”, London, University of California Press, 1993.

²¹ Jacques Merlino: “Les vérités yougoslaves ne sont pas toutes bonnes à dire”, Albin Michel, Paris, 1993, pp. 127-129

²² ‘Yediot Aharonot’, (Leshabat supplement), Tel Aviv, 11 February 2000

²³ Appearance by Sylvana Foa on BBC News, 25 July 1996, reported in: Nik Gowing, “Media coverage: Help or hindrance in conflict prevention”, Report to the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, 1997

²⁴ “Comprehensive review of the whole question of peacekeeping operations in all their aspects” (F. Public information capacity; paragraph 146) UN General Assembly – Security Council - A/55/305–S/2000/809 (21st August 2000)

²⁵ Jacques Merlino: “Les vérités yougoslaves ne sont pas toutes bonnes à dire”, Albin Michel, Paris, 1993, pp. 141-142

²⁶ Mark Laity, House of Commons Select Committee on Defence Report on Kosovo, Examination of Witnesses, October 2000, (Question 749, Wednesday 10 May 2000)

²⁷ “America’s Team; The Odd Couple - A report on the relationship between the media and the military”; Chapter 14; The Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, 1995

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Martin Bell: “In Harm’s Way”, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1995, p. 133

³⁰ See “Partiality in conflict reporting: the media’s secret shame?” in: “Media coverage: Help or hindrance in conflict prevention”, Nik Gowing, Report to the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, 1997

³¹ “BBC veteran denies bias”, Janine Gibson, 17 April 1999; ‘The Guardian’

³² See: “Opinions: In times of war, should the BBC support the allied cause?”, ‘The Guardian’, 17 April 1999; and “War cannot be won by press releases alone”, John Keegan, ‘Daily Telegraph’, 17 April 1999

³³ “CNN had militairen in dienst”, ‘Trouw’, Amsterdam, 21 February, 2000; “CNN let army staff into newsroom”, ‘The Guardian’, 12 April 2000

³⁴ “Joint Vision 2020”: US Government Printing Office, Washington DC, June 2000.

³⁵ “The Military and the Media: A Troubled Embrace”, Bernard E. Trainor; ‘Parameters’, December 1990

³⁶ Valerie Adams, “The Media and the Falklands Campaign”, New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1986.

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- ³⁷ The difficult relationship between the press, their minders and the military is extensively described in "Journalists at War: The Dynamics of News Reporting during the Falklands Conflict", David E. Morrison and Howard Tumber, Sage Publications, London 1988.
- ³⁸ First Report, Session 1982-83, "The Handling of Press and Public Information During the Falklands Conflict", HC 17-I
- ³⁹ "Censorship in the Gulf", David Benjamin, Auburn University, Alabama, 1995.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid, quoting: Pete Williams, "Statement before the U.S. Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs", in "The Media and the Gulf War", ed. Hedrick Smith, (Washington, DC: Seven Locks Press, 1992) 42.
- ⁴¹ "Press vie for pole position", 'Daily Telegraph' 12 June 1999, Bob Roberts, Skopje.
- ⁴² Col Campen (USA), in: "Horizon: The I-Bomb", BBC Television, 1997
- ⁴³ Serbian news agency Beta, 30 May 99
- ⁴⁴ "Anatomy of Pain", a documentary aired on RTS in mid October 2000, shortly after Milosevic's downfall, supports this theory, indicating, for example that the daughter of an RTS senior editor, on night shift the night of the attack, was called by her father who urged her to leave the building before the missile struck. "RTS bombing - The ultimate sacrifice", 'The Guardian' 23 October 2000
- ⁴⁵ Letter by NATO Spokesman Jamie Shea to IFJ General Secretary Aidan White, 12 April 1999
- ⁴⁶ 'Vecernje novosti' web site, Belgrade, 23 June 1999
- ⁴⁷ Radio Netherlands has compiled a very comprehensive and up-to-date dossier on the Yugoslav media and the Kosovo conflict on the Internet. Issues covered include the media scene, psychological warfare and a number of other points related to the media war <http://www.rnw.nl/realradio/dossiers/html/kosovo.html>
- ⁴⁸ Author's conversation with a London-based Yugoslav journalist during the conflict
- ⁴⁹ "Belgrade bans independent B92", Morand Fachot, BBC News Online, 24 March 1999, <http://news2.thls.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/monitoring/newsid%5F302000/302624.stm>
- ⁵⁰ Kosovo-related costs; Memorandum submitted by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, Minutes of Evidence 16 March 2000
- ⁵¹ "Monitoring the Media War", Morand Fachot, BBC News Online, 20 April 1999 <http://news2.thls.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/monitoring/newsid%5F315000/315232.stm>
- ⁵² "Kosovo crisis played out on the Internet too", Editorial Analysis, P. Feuillherade, 'World Media' 2 April 1999, BBC Monitoring
- ⁵³ House of Commons Select Committee on Defence, Report on Kosovo: III. The conduct of the campaign, UK Media Campaign, October 2000
- ⁵⁴ "How the war was spun": BBC World TV, 10 June 2000
- ⁵⁵ "The Kosovo Crisis and the media: Reflections of a NATO spokesman", Jamie Shea
- ⁵⁶ House of Commons Select Committee on Defence Report on Kosovo, Examination of Witnesses, October 2000, (Question 789, Wednesday 10 May 2000)
- ⁵⁷ "Media campaign 'more important than the needs of the military'", Andrew Gilligan and David Cracknell, 'Daily Telegraph' 16 May 99
- ⁵⁸ House of Commons Select Committee on Defence, Report on Kosovo: III. The conduct of the campaign, UK Media Campaign, October 2000
- ⁵⁹ "Media campaign 'more important than the needs of the military'", Andrew Gilligan and David Cracknell, 'Daily Telegraph' 16 May 99
- ⁶⁰ "Les enseignements du Kosovo - V. La politique d'information et de communication", Ministère de la Défense, Paris, novembre 1999.
- ⁶¹ "OTAN - 'Questions sur une guerre humanitaire' - Temps Présent"; Télévision Suisse Romande, juin 1999
- ⁶² Maj-Gen Boris Alekseyev - ITAR-TASS news agency, Moscow, 18 January 2000