

# The role of the media in Bosnia

*Despite the media attention that has been devoted to the conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia since 1991, the public in the West is still confused about the developments in the Balkans primarily because the media has failed to grasp what the fundamental issue is in the former Yugoslavia—a grab for the capital and economic resources of Bosnia by the ex-communists, war-lords and nationalistic fanatics from Croatia and Serbia. The issues of religious, cultural, linguistic and ‘ethnic’ differences have been used by those political opportunists in Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia to aid their own political and economic agendas, and by political leaders in the US, Britain and France in their efforts to deter Western involvement in the crisis.*

**Maggie O’Kane** reported extensively for *The Guardian* during the Gulf War and the Balkan wars in Croatia and Bosnia. She was amongst the first journalists to report on the secret death camps and the ‘ethnic’ evictions that were taking place in Bosnia, in an effort to ensure that the political leaders of Europe would act against the first instance of genocide in Europe since 1945. In this recent interview with Eddy Jokovich, she outlines the role of the British government in the management of the conflicts in the Balkans and how the media has influenced diplomatic activity.

*Some commentators are now claiming that the stage is set for the ‘end-game’ in the Bosnian war. These claims have been made since the commencement of the war in 1992, a war that could have been avoided with clear and decisive actions by the Western powers. What are the reasons for the reluctance of the United Nations, NATO, the European Union, and the US in the resolution of the political conflicts in Bosnia and Croatia?*

First of all, there has been a fear of casualties for the UN peacekeepers. Historically speaking, it was Otto von Bismarck stated that the Balkans isn’t ‘worth the life of one single healthy Pomeranian grenadier’ and as far as the British, the French and the Americans were concerned, they weren’t prepared to stick to the political decisions that involved risks to themselves, and I specifically refer to the British and the French governments, and in particular the British Foreign Minister Douglas Hurd and Prime Minister John Major.

For them, the Balkans—Bosnia and Croatia—were seen as something that was politically sensitive and difficult—it was an issue that kept coming up on the television and it made them uncomfortable. In the background, there was a lot of public noise about the New World Order after its successes during the Gulf war, that something should be done about Bosnia, but at the end of the day, the Western leaders weren’t prepared to take the political risks involved and the prospects of dead British or French soldiers returning in body bags. That was the bottom line.

*Have the multi-political and historical linkages within the former Yugoslavia got very much to do with the continuation of the crisis, such as British, French and Russian influence on Serbia, and German influence over Croatia?*

The historical factors in the region have been well overplayed. History has been used time and again by the political powers as an excuse not to get involved, and one way that they have used history to distance themselves from the events is to talk about ‘ancient ethnic’ quagmires.

The Ottoman empire had a history of strife that goes back for four or five hundred years, and for that reason the great powers have claimed that it’s too messy for them to get involved. I think that there have been traditional historical allegiances but in World War II the Italians and Germans fought against the French and the British, so these allegiances can be interpreted in which ever way one desires.

History was used disingenuously by the Western powers, particu-

larly Britain and France and, to a lesser extent, the US, as an excuse not to get their fingers burnt, and time and again we hear the question of the Russians being dragged in on the side of the Serbs being brought up to frighten Western popular opinion into the idea that the West was going to get dragged into a horrific World War III. And we are still hearing these types of statements coming from Radovan Karadzic. In reality the Russians had much more to think about in terms of economic aid coming from the US and Britain, and they certainly weren’t going to jeopardise the aid by coming in on the side of the Serbs.

*Why have the diplomatic actions that have been implemented by the international community failed so dismally?*

Primarily because those options have been fundamentally flawed in that they were based on the division of the country through the acceptance of the ‘ethnic’ cleansing that occurred and rewarded Serbian aggression. That was probably the best option at that time—an option that still offered some sort of idea of sovereignty for Bosnia, but the whole premise of these options was based on division and partition. The second difficulty was that it was based on asking the Serbs to roll back twenty per cent of the land that they had conquered.

In military terms, irrespective of how unjust the Serb territorial gains may have been in Bosnia, it is highly unrealistic to turn around to these same men that have been fighting for two or three years in difficult terrain in order to conquer large tracts of land, and then expect them to simply relinquish military control of their conquests when they are asked kindly and politely by the United Nations.

And from the Serbian perspective, they too have lost soldiers and civilians in the fighting in Bosnia. So it doesn’t make any sense, politically or militarily, for the Serbs to relinquish the land that they have conquered. Therefore, if the UN wants the Serbs to pull back from the land that they have captured, the UN will have to make them pull back by force. In this sense, there has been very limited success in terms of the UN action. For example, at the end of the winter in 1993, when the Serbs were told very clearly that there would be international intervention unless they stopped the shelling of Sarajevo, they responded—because there was a serious threat of military action by the great powers.

Similarly in terms of the cease-fire in Sarajevo in 1994 after the Market Place massacre, when 68 people were killed, the Serbs realised that the West was talking business and that if they didn’t respond, then there was going to be retaliation and their heavy guns were going to be

hit—on that occasion, they pulled back. So the problem with all the plans and options provided by the international community is that there hasn't been a mechanism in place in which to enforce them.

*In essence, this has been the major obstacle in the management of the conflicts in Bosnia—difficulties with the implementation of UN resolutions, and interpretations of the 'mandate'.*

Of course, it gets down to definitions of the UN mandate in Bosnia, and what it was expected to achieve. The UN didn't go into Bosnia to try and stop the war or to stop the killing. In my belief the UN went into Bosnia only to contain the crisis—this has always been implied through the statements coming out of the UN and the US State Department. In other words, the great powers do not want the conflicts in Bosnia spilling over into the surrounding areas of the Balkans, such as Kosovo, Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Albania.

When you talk to the UN soldiers on the ground in Bosnia, the problem was that there was a confusion over what the mandate of the UN was—the original mandate was to supply humanitarian aid, and then the mandate was changed to protect the UN safe havens. And then there was the confusion of what the semantics of 'peace-keeping' were. The constituent parts of the UN Security Council didn't actually state that 'we are going to stop the war and genocide that is happening in Bosnia; we are not going to allow the killing of thousands of people in Europe in 1990s'. They didn't decide that what they went in to do in Bosnia was to try and contain the crisis—the UN resolutions that were passed after this point were knee-jerk responses to public outcry which, in essence was, 'oh God, we're having Srebrenica on the television; we're seeing blind boys, we're seeing dead children—we better pass a resolution'. So there was no worked out plan, and there was no clear aim other than to show domestic audiences that 'something', no matter what it was, was being done for the Bosnians.

In Kuwait during the Gulf War, there was an aim—to get the Iraqis out of Kuwait. In contrast, in Bosnia the problem was that the aim was never defined. Diplomacy in Bosnia consisted of a carcass of dead policies, where there was no clear aim, and no power to enforce the resolutions passed at the Security Council. That has been the problem all along, where the West has begrudgingly responded to public outcry in an attempt to contain the crisis and hope it will go away.

*In this sense, the management of the Bosnian conflicts by the Western governments has largely been in response to popular domestic political factors, rather than a genuine humanitarian concern.*

Yes, for example, the establishment of 'safe'-havens for the protection of the Bosnian Muslims was passed by the UN Security Council in 1993 with the mandate of 35,000 UN troops on the ground. This number was seen as an absolute essential, if the designated safe-havens were indeed seen to be 'safe'. The authorised amount of troops was then reduced to 10,000, and finally, when the funds came through for the operations of the safe-havens, only 3,500 troops became available. So, the UN can make these fine gestures through resolutions passed through the Security Council, but if the UN isn't prepared to back up their grandiose statements with the financial, military and resource commitments, and with a clear vision of what it is trying to achieve, then it flounders, and it becomes a joke. One example of that joke was the implementation of the 'No-Fly' Zone banning military flights over Bosnia.

*It is evident that the agenda for the great powers has been to facilitate a dismemberment of Bosnia and share the pieces between Serbia and Croatia, either through an outright partition, or through a de facto partition through unwieldy confederal plans. As soon as one tabled plan falls apart, or loses support, another plan is quickly proposed, ultimately with the identical goal—to partition Bosnia-Herzegovina.*

Sure, and the plans seem to be getting worse. With the Vance-Owen negotiations, David Owen stated that 'it's [the Vance-Owen Plan] a plan made in hell' and that he recognised that by actually agreeing to this division of Bosnia he was agreeing to the basic hypothesis that, to use Radovan Karadzic's words, that 'we Serbs can-

not live together with Muslims and Croats; we are like dog and cat'.

That hypothesis has been resisted by the Bosnian people, but unfortunately a reality has been created now where the whole situation has been polarised. The different 'ethnic' groups have been split, and by presenting and promoting plans that encourage a partition of an independent nation into 'ethnic' cantons and zones, the great powers are playing into the hands of the Bosnian Serbs.

This process first of all, legitimated the 'ethnic' cleansing enacted by the Bosnian Serbs and, secondly, created the environment in 1993 that facilitated a ferocious land grab between the Bosnian Croats and the Muslims.

*The mainstream media depicts complex political issues in a simplistic manner, usually with a wide array of cultural clichés, historical inaccuracies, and broad statements for consumption by domestic media audiences. How has the Western print and electronic media represented the conflicts in Bosnia and Croatia?*

It's very difficult to generalise and say 'the media', but what became clear was that initially, many journalists who went into Bosnia, had never previously covered the area, and had come in as soon as the conflict broke out. It became clear to journalists very quickly—but not quickly enough—that what was actually happening was a land grab across Bosnia which was orchestrated from Belgrade. There has been a lot of criticism of journalists—and I myself have been criticised a great deal—for the perceived bias against the Bosnian Serbs. But what I say to that, on behalf of the Bosnian Muslims is that the 'truth' is not always objective.

'Truth', at the end of the day, in the Bosnian conflict implies that there are people who are culpable and I believe that it was the Bosnian Serbs, led by Radovan Karadzic and encouraged by Slobodan Milosevic, who carried out most of the atrocities that occurred, and certainly set the set the whole climate for this war. So to say that it seems that the media has been lacking in objectivity is a contradiction of terms—the 'truth' is not objective—that is the reality.

There has been substantial criticism of the international media from the 'great' powers, and from the Serbs. I believe that I went into Bosnia with no mandate to favour any group in the conflict. I went there as a professional journalist and attempted to tell the 'truth' and the 'truth' paints the Bosnian Serbs in a very bad light.

Journalists in the former Yugoslavia have done a satisfactory job—quite a few journalists who worked in incredibly dangerous situations were operating as conduits to the outside world to let it know about the atrocities that they were witnessing, and attempting to depict the events as they were happening.

The Gulf war in 1991 was probably one of the most shameful periods for international journalism in that we failed to tell the 'truth'. We failed to get to the areas in the Gulf and paint a true picture of that war. We were used as tools by Western governments to plot down the Iraqis. But in the Bosnian war, journalists have made a good job of telling the truth, and made a good job of making Western governments uncomfortable with the reality in Bosnia. In the end, Douglas Hurd talked about journalists as the 'something-must-be-done brigade'. His last resort was to shoot the messengers and claim that journalists have power of information without the responsibilities to act. Irrespective of Hurd's public statements, I am proud of the reportage that the international media has achieved in Bosnia.

*Looking at the use of the media apparatus during war-time, how has the media been manipulated by the Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian political leaders?*

To understand the background to the wars in Croatia and in Bosnia there needs to be an acknowledgement of how absolutely and completely the media has been controlled by the political leaders in the former Yugoslavia.

Milosevic and Franjo Tudjman, the Croatian president, both realised how important it was to instigate a propaganda campaign that would prepare the country of Tito's children—essentially an ethnically mixed country—for the division of the Yugoslav ideal.

That campaign began in the late 1980s, certainly in Belgrade, which involved the taking over of the television station, the sacking of people who were not sympathetic to the idea of the 'greater' Serbia, and this resulted in the slow and systematic take-over of the media and turning it into a propaganda machine for the government.

Milosevic was most successful this media campaign, and Tudjman also realised the importance of control of the media, particularly television, and by 1990 the people were prepared for the disintegration of Yugoslavia.

It was very strange to talk to an old Serbian peasant woman where the Muslim woman who she had lived beside for forty years had her house burnt out. I asked her how she felt about that and she said 'well, I'm very sad about her, but you must know that those Muslims are taking Serbian babies, nailing them to crosses and sending them down the river Drina'. She looked at me and she honestly believed the propaganda that had been disseminated through the media, so without the control of the media, it would have been very difficult to polarise the people in the way that they have. This may be a generalisation, as there were other aspects that have been added to the tools of propaganda, but essentially the media was a very powerful tool. It was used by former communists like Milosevic, who understood very well how important it was to control the media and did an exceptionally ruthless job of it.

*The British government has provided many excuses for the lack of resolve in Bosnia and Croatia—excuses such as 'age-old animosities', 'blood feuds', 'people like cat and dog', 'civil war'. Why have these excuses, complete with their racist overtones and clichéd depictions, have been used by the political leaders?*

The political leaders in Britain were faced with the situation where the press and the television media was bringing pictures that bewildered and upset their constituents. The British people did look to their leadership and demanded that something should be done—they were genuinely shocked because they'd been to Dubrovnik and other parts of the Dalmatian coast for their holidays and they saw that the Yugoslavs were like themselves—they were white, they weren't like the Rwandans. So they looked, as people do to their leaders, and they asked 'well can something be done for the people of Bosnia; where is this New World Order?'

And our leaders, in order to justify their inaction and their political cowardice, used these statements to promote the idea that Bosnia was a crisis that was waiting to happen, that it was out of our hands, that the problem goes back hundred of years, and they kept on using the word 'Muslims'—the process was to keep disengaging, and to keep classifying the peoples of the Balkans in a way that makes their plight less identifiable.

Therefore, the strategy has been to use 'Muslims' and references to fundamentalism, to use 'ancient ethnic quagmires', to use the Vietnam syndrome, to use all those words that push the Yugoslavs as far away as possible, so that when the domestic audiences look at the scenes of a mortar landing in the market place in Sarajevo or Tuzla, or the see the kids that come into the Kosevo hospital that could easily be their own, or realise that it's happening in the middle of Europe, they can then be disengaged from the reality of the situation.

Domestic audiences have been bombarded with this distancing and disengagement process—a process that claims that the Yugoslavs are not really like us in the West, and that since they're Muslims, Croats, Serbs and 'weird' people who have been fighting each other for hundred of years, then it becomes more palatable when nothing is done is assist them. It's a very clear political ploy in a manner that was almost subconscious initially, but certainly became conscious afterwards. But why should Douglas Hurd continue talking about the 'Muslim' government in Bosnia, when the Bosnian government is recognised and has been recognised by the United Nations and the European Union as a multi-ethnic government since 1992. The Bosnian government has specified that that's who they are, and that's how they wish to be addressed. So when the British Foreign Secretary refers to the Bosnian government in those terms, it is obvious that there is a very clear political agenda, and a very cynical one.

One of the big excuses that has been given all along is the mantra that intervention would jeopardise the aid program, which was simply an excuse for inaction. José Maria Mendiluce, who was the head of the UNHCR aid program for nearly two years in Bosnia, was responsible for trying to bring through hundreds and thousands of tons of aid. When he finished his term in Bosnia through sheer frustration and exhaustion, he returned to Spain and wrote an article in a Spanish newspaper which ended with the words 'yes to intervention'. He outlined that it had become impossible to get aid through the Bosnian Serb blockades and bullets, and that he would have supported intervention to get the aid through.

Typically, the Bosnian Serbs would shoot at those UN aid convoys in an attempt to stop them, but on the few occasions when the convoys retaliated against this fire, the Serbs would pull back, cease their fire, and the convoys got through. So, it was possible to support these convoys with military protection—there was substantial disinformation being floated around by the UN along the lines that the Bosnians would starve if the West threatened the Bosnian Serbs with military intervention. The aid program would have been far more successful if there had been the solid threat and support of military action whenever the aid was blocked by the Bosnian Serbs.

If we consider the words of Mendiluce, and not to the words of the politicians who were desperately trying to avoid getting involved, then the process of intervention wasn't to militarily defeat the Serbs, but to uphold the integrity of the UN mission in Bosnia, and to make sure that the humanitarian aid would get through to the people. No one was saying that the West had to defeat the Serbs. What those who were in favour of intervention were saying was that even the use of air power would have shown a seriousness of intent which would have caused the Bosnian Serbs to re-assess the validity and the sense of the continuation of their campaign of 'ethnic' cleansing.

That was all that was required—on a simplistic level, it's akin to the school bully in the playground. He kicks a couple of kids, looks around and realises that nobody is doing anything about it, so he continues to kick the rest of them. In the case of the Bosnian Serbs, if there was any threat of censure—even in the form of airpower—I believe the Serbs would have backed off. The UN attempted to paint the Bosnian Serbs as ten-foot-giants who were invincible, but, as the limited actions by NATO have shown, they are not invincible. There were many Bosnian Serb soldiers who didn't want to be in those front-line trenches and if the West stood up to them, they would have been only too happy to pull back. But the West never had the courage to stand up to the Bosnian Serbs and when history books of the Bosnian war are written, people like Douglas Hurd and John Major and the French will be seen as accomplices to the genocide in Bosnia because, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote, 'all it takes for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing', and in this case the good men did nothing. Through their actions, the 'good' men have made us all accomplices to the crimes in Bosnia. The terrible tragedy in Bosnia is that the war could have been avoided with just some courage—but we just didn't have men of courage.

*At which point should the military protection and intervention from the UN been implemented?*

At virtually any point throughout the conflict, but specifically in 1992, and throughout most of 1993. But time ran out very quickly after the UN Security Council discovered in August 1992 when it became very clear, despite the fine words and grandiose statements from the great powers claiming that what had happened to the Jews during World War II would never happen again, and despite the outrage of the world when no action was taken to come to the aid of the Bosnian people, that it was a direct message to the Bosnian Serbs that no one in the world community was going to stop them. There needed to be a strong and decisive action in 1992.

It's very sad to think back to early days in April and May of 1992 when the Bosnian Serbs began the siege of Sarajevo, going around the city of Sarajevo speaking to people who asked where the sixth fleet was, and when it was arriving—the great tragedy was that they really

believed that they were coming.

Then there were the criticisms of the journalists writing about Bill Clinton's election promises that he would stop the 'ethnic' cleansing when he assumed the presidency of the US. The claims were that the journalists writing about Clinton's promises added pressure to the role of the UN and NATO, and marred the peace negotiations by boosting the expectations of the Bosnian government for military intervention from the West, and giving the Bosnian people false hopes for their future. I suppose that's something you have in your conscience—and you need one to overdo your own importance in this role. Journalists tend to think that they're much more important than they really are, but the people in Bosnia did have some hope for a quick end to the conflict—they did wait for the sixth fleet but it never arrived.

*How much of the conflict is really about the arms trade and the special relationship with the US arms industry had the Yugoslav military and Slobodan Milosevic?*

I don't think that that's relevant in this case. There was a political decision to use the arms that existed within Yugoslavia to create the Greater Serbia and Milosevic had more than enough arms in Serbia, and also in Bosnia. This situation was a remnant from the Tito era—because of Tito's position in world politics and the unique role of Yugoslavia being courted by East and West, Yugoslavia contained substantial internal military resources.

This situation makes a mockery of the arms embargo placed over the entire former Yugoslavia in 1991—there was a massive amount of military hardware controlled by the Bosnian Serbs. Even though the UN General Assembly and the US Congress voted to lift the embargo, it is still in place today. And there have been many arguments used by the political leaders in the West to keep the embargo in place. Douglas Hurd's argument was against the creation of a level playing field, which was based on the premise that the Bosnian government should not have access to guns and armaments because they may shoot back at the Serb paramilitaries, create a balance of power, and prolong the war.

Other arguments against the lifting of the embargo were that it would increase the volume of killing in Bosnia and that it would jeopardise and compromise the position of the UN forces. The assumption was that there would be a huge push by the Bosnian Serbs to finish off the business and create their greater Serbia via a *fait accompli* before the Bosnian government could get access to heavy weaponry.

The embargo was certainly a mistake, but after realising that the war was coming to Bosnia, it was naïve attempt by the great powers to initiate damage limitation based on the theory that less guns would result in less killing.

It was probably done for good if naïve reasons initially, but legally, it didn't respect the sovereignty of the Bosnia-Herzegovina, or the right they have to defend their sovereignty. The Americans have unilaterally lifted the arms embargo by stating that they won't stop arms shipments to the former Yugoslavia—it's still a bone of contention where there are many arguments for and against. As usual, the British government is reluctant to admit to its mistake, but irrespective of this, it is now a political question that is being debated but doesn't reach any conclusion.

*There have been a series of major developments, with the falling of the safe-havens in Bosnia, the eviction of the Krajina Serbs in Croatia, and the market massacre in Sarajevo and the resultant NATO bombings of military sites in Pale. Where will the conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia go from here, and is there a window of opportunity for peaceful resolution?*

In Croatia, there was an uneasy peace brokered by Cyrus Vance in 1992, and maintained by UNPROFOR in several regions of the Krajina. Three years later, through frustration and impatience with the UN, the Croatian army overran the Krajina, so when there is a perception by one side or the other that there is no justice, then it is sure that there will not be any long-term peace.

It was Peter Gailbraith, the US Ambassador to Croatia, who stated that the world is looking at a new Beirut and a war that is going to go into the twenty-first century. The Bosnians will have no option but

to fight to go back to their homes, and as the current proposals are to set them up like the Palestinians in holding pens in Srebrenica, Zepa, and Sarajevo, I think that they will keep building up their resources and keep fighting until the Bosnian Serb soldiers are worn out—some of them have been fighting for three years. There have been threats of mutiny in the Bosnian Serb army and already Karadzic is starting to lose his authority and support to General Mladic. Ultimately, the Bosnians have a right to go home and I think they'll keep fighting for it because they really have no other option. One way or another it's going to be a long drawn out war.

The conflict in Croatia will have to be sorted out in terms of the Krajina and Eastern Slavonia. Perhaps this may be easier to solve in terms of the Serbs within Croatia given constitutional and cultural safeguards but taking into account the recent expulsion of the Serbs in the Krajina, the chances of that are becoming slimmer all the time.

*Is there a possibility that other contentious regions in the former Yugoslavia such as Macedonia or Kosovo could become part of the greater Serbia equation?*

It is difficult to really predict because there are so many different factors involved. I feel that Milosevic has pushed as far as he can at the present time in Bosnia, and perhaps for domestic political purposes, he may be tempted invoke the 'Albanian question' by placing the Serb refugees from the Krajina into Kosovo. Already there are UN-American military observers in Macedonia, and there is a careful eye on these countries in the southern areas of the former Yugoslavia because Europe and the US is very nervous about the prospects of further conflict. So from the point of view of international interest in deterring conflict, perhaps there will be peace in this region, but it is difficult to be optimistic after the experience of Bosnia. ■