

MEDIA INTERACTION IN THE KOSOVO CONFLICT MARCH-JUNE 1999

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Abstract

The decade of the 1990s had seen considerable developments in both the theory and practice of the concept of 'Media War', the interaction between the media, public opinion, politics and military force. The conflict over Kosovo fought between NATO and the Republic of Yugoslavia showed many predicted 'Media War' characteristics that were the consequence of developments earlier in the 1990s. But the appearance of 'new news' and the Internet also gave the Kosovo conflict unique characteristics. The overall result suggests a major change in the political-military-media relationship potentially comparable to that of the 1991 Gulf War.

Introduction

It was the official position of the British government, and indeed of NATO, that despite its recourse to military force over Kosovo between 24th March and 12th June 1999 it was not at war with the Yugoslav people. This phenomenon of undeclared war has been a commonplace of the second half of the Twentieth Century. Nevertheless, the Kosovo conflict was the first inter-state war of any size since the Gulf War of 1990-1991, and certainly the first fought since then by Britain, the United States or other western powers. Among the features which distinguished the conduct of the Kosovo conflict, both in comparison to the Gulf War and to other, lesser conflicts that had occurred in the intervening years, was the role of both the national and international media. Technological, social and political developments both in the manner in which military force was used, and in civilian mass news communications, interacted together to render this war more media permeable, and interpermeable, than any other in history. This media interaction with military force and with political responses had been largely understood and predicted by theory and from other experiences in the 1990s. However, as is usual in such matters, the degree of prediction was not exact.

By way of an introduction, three episodes or anecdotes should serve to demonstrate the degree of media interpermeability of this war, and in particular the use of novel news and communications sources. All of these episodes represent a use of 'new media' in war, or a use of the media in a way that was unique to Kosovo.

First, it was apparent from the start of NATO bombing that public opinion in all countries involved would have a critical role to play in the war's conduct. On 25th March, after one day of NATO bombing, the BBC announced via its Internet online website the result of various opinion polls, including a telephone poll conducted by its CEEFAX television text service in Britain, which showed roughly twice as many respondents opposed to the bombing as supporting it. As more polling evidence accumulated, this was rapidly shown to be a rogue result, with roughly 60 per cent of respondents to most British opinion polls supporting NATO action against Yugoslavia (for example a Gallup poll for the *Daily Telegraph* on 29th March gave NATO a 58 per cent approval rating). On the same day the Yugoslav state news agency Tanjug picked up the CEEFAX poll and released it as a press statement, saying that a BBC analysis had shown two-thirds of the British public to be opposed to NATO's actions. This release was also placed on the Tanjug website. Also on the same day, and contrary to the NATO official position, the Assembly of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia determined that a state of war did exist, and recalled its ambassadors from the United States, Britain, France

and Germany, whose aircraft had taken part in the first night's bombing. Closing the loop of this story, on leaving London early in the morning of Monday 29th March the Yugoslav Deputy Ambassador to Britain gave an interview to BBC Breakfast News, in which he stated as fact that two-thirds of the British people supported Yugoslavia.¹

An event such as this, involving the deliberate selection of data from an apparently neutral or even enemy source in order to generate propaganda and misinformation could theoretically have happened in any war, although no parallels from the past show the same speed and ubiquity of media interaction. The same is not true of the second example, which depended entirely on technology unavailable before the 1990s. From the start of military operations the British Ministry of Defence (MoD) and Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) set up a joint daily live televised press conference, together with a special joint Internet website. This was followed on 26th March by a Foreign Office website in the Serbian language. The practice of creating such websites was also followed by most of the major participants in the conflict. At the MoD/FCO press conference on 31st March, Defence Secretary George Robertson announced that the joint website was receiving 150,000 hits a day, 1,400 of them from within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. He offered in response the website address, and also the website address of the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague. At the MoD/FCO press conference next day on 1st April, Foreign Secretary Robin Cook announced that the FCO Serbian language website had since its opening five days earlier received 10,000 hits from within Serbia alone. This compares with approximately 50,000 Serbs with access to the Internet, about 1,000 of them in Kosovo. The FCO website invited the inhabitants of Kosovo to e-mail accounts of Serb atrocities to London, as part of an evidence database for future war crimes prosecutions. Within the first week they announced that 'hundreds' of such accounts were being received.²

The last illustrative episode is both more complete in its forms of media interaction with military action rather than politics, and also more controversial as one of the more notorious events of the war. On Wednesday 14th April, United States' F-16 aircraft of 315th Fighter Wing flying from Aviano in Italy misidentified a convoy of Kosovar Albanian refugees in tractors near Djakovica as military trucks, and bombed them, causing multiple casualties. The principal reason for the mis-identification was that the rules of engagement

¹ CEEFAX telephone poll results reported on <http://www.news.bbc.co.uk> at 17.46 GMT, 25 March 1999; 'British citizens against the NATO aggression', <http://www.serbia-info.com/news> 26 March 1999; Interview with Yugoslav Deputy Ambassador, BBC1 Breakfast News, 7.47 a.m., 29th March 1999.

² The joint MoD/FCO website with transcripts of the daily press conferences was at <http://www.mod.uk/news>; see also 'Kosovo – The Conflict on the Web' reported at <http://news.bbc.co.uk> at 13.59 GMT, 29th March 1999.

required the pilots to fly no lower than 15,000 feet for their own safety. This in turn was the result of a conviction within the United States' government that any casualties to their aircrews, reported through the media, would provoke a mass public outcry against the war. Reports of the bombing came first from the RTS (Radio-Television Serbia) studio in Pristina. As in the case of Baghdad during the Gulf War, there were a number of senior western print journalists and camera teams in Belgrade with the permission of the Yugoslav government, based at the Hyatt Hotel. They were present to report events from Yugoslavia, on the understanding that although there was no official censorship, Yugoslav political control would prevent them reporting openly. The first information received about the bombing by the chief press spokesman at NATO Headquarters in Brussels, Dr Jamie Shea, came by means of a telephone call from a sympathetic western journalist in Belgrade, warning Shea that the Yugoslav government was offering them transport to the scene of the incident. The first television pictures of the devastation appeared that evening broadcast by RTS, picked up and repeated globally by CNN; while western journalists were indeed shown the location. Watching these television pictures on CNN was the first notification that the NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), US General Wesley Clark, received of the incident. NATO at first believed that there had been two convoys, one civilian and one military, and that it had hit only the military convoy. Three hours later General Clark was interviewed on radio, in the course of which he speculated that Yugoslav aircraft had hit the tractor convoy. This broadcast was made virtually simultaneously with the afternoon Pentagon press conference, at which it was admitted that American aircraft had done the damage. There then followed a period of confusion behind the scenes, leading to the NATO announcement next day that there had been two separate incidents and the release of an audiotape of the pilot involved – which turned out to be the wrong tape. Dr Shea was for a few days in the difficult position of being able to say nothing, while arguing in private that NATO must get its story straight. Finally, five days after the incident, the commander of the F-16 wing responsible, Brigadier-General Dan Leaf, came to NATO Headquarters to give a special press conference, explaining what had really happened. Two days earlier, RTS broadcast what it claimed to be an audio tape recording of the bombing incident, with an American AWACS ordering an F-16 pilot to bomb civilian tractors. The clumsiness of this forgery caused much amusement among western analysts familiar with real NATO radio procedure.³

³ A full account including interviews with the leading participants appears in the television programme *'War In Europe: Episode 2'* first transmitted UK Channel 4, February 2000; see also the relevant NATO press conferences 14th April to 19th April 1999, transcripts on the NATO website <http://www.nato.com>. For the

The Djakovica tractor bombing had strong parallels with two episodes from the 1991 Gulf War. One of these was the bombing of the Amiriyah bunker on 13th February 1991 by an American F-117 Nighthawk stealth aircraft, which has remained controversial. The other was the lesser-known bombing of a market at the town of Fallouja by RAF GR1 Tornados on 16th February 1991, when after a very similar argument behind the scenes the British opted to announce the truth, that their bombs had failed to guide properly in aiming for a bridge.⁴ The difference in 1999 over Kosovo was that the speed of response required from a greater degree in media inter-penetration, and at a higher command level, had wrong-footed NATO in a military operation in which both sides placed credibility very high on their list of aims. As Prime Minister Tony Blair later remarked, it was ‘frustrating’ that the Yugoslavs had ‘to some extent, control of the media agenda’.⁵

As a final point, although all the events regarding the Kosovo conflict detailed above happened, and are documented and footnoted, none of the references given is to a conventionally ‘published’ print article or book, other than those relating to events before 1999. The author holds copies of all of this evidence, chiefly downloaded from the Internet in the course of the conflict; but there is no centralised ‘archive’ that is open to be consulted. Much of the evidence of the Kosovo conflict is of this nature.

Media War and the Context of Kosovo

Inevitably, the conduct of political-military-media interaction during the Kosovo conflict contained a few unexpected events. But generally this interaction confirmed to themes of the development in the 1990s of the political-military-media relationship that were quite well understood under the broad heading of ‘Media War’. First appearing in the immediate aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, this term has now entered general political discourse. The expression ‘Media War’ was used in relation to Kosovo as a simple synonym for a deception or propaganda campaign, both by Dr Shea at NATO Headquarters and by President Slobodan Milosevic in his only English-language television interview.⁶ If this is the trend of the future then ‘Media War’ may join ‘Ministry of Information’ as just another

Yugoslav ‘transcript’ broadcast on RTS late 17th April, see the Tanjug press statement 18th April, reproduced at <http://www.serbia-info.com> for that date.

⁴ See Stephen Badsey, ‘The Media War’ in John Pimlott and Stephen Badsey (eds.) (1992) *The Gulf War Assessed* (London: Arms and Armour) 236; Philip M. Taylor, (1992) *War and the Media: Power and Persuasion in the Gulf* (London: Manchester University Press).

⁵ Interview with Prime Minister Tony Blair, in *War in Europe: Episode 2* (see note 2).

⁶ Dr Shea, edited interview used on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation *Lateline: A War of Words* transmitted ABC Australia, 15th July 1999; President Milosevic interview with HOUSTON-KHOU-TV, transmitted KHOU USA 21st April 1999 (see Note 32).

transparent euphemism for propaganda. But in its origins and intent the term 'Media War' conveys a rather more sophisticated idea: that in warfare in the 1990s the interaction between politics, public opinion, the media in all its forms, and military force had become a central issue to the manner in which that could be used. Developments in western political thinking, in concepts of the use of armed force, and in the mass media since 1991 meant that this was particularly true of Kosovo.

In addition to 'Media War', which attempts as a concept to embrace the entire gamut of political-military-media interaction, the events of Kosovo were also influenced, and to some extent governed, by other conceptual developments in all three spheres which had taken place since 1991. The notion of a major shift in western military strategy was a commonplace by the end of the decade, reflected particularly in the United States PDD 25 of 1995, the NATO Rome Declaration, the British Strategic Defence Review of 1998, and in a host of other ways; reaching a final form in the announcement of the NATO new strategic concept at its 50th Anniversary commemoration in New York, which co-incided with the Kosovo conflict.

American reluctance to deploy ground troops, fear of a 'quagmire', and reliance on air power had been evident as a developing trend since 1991 (and as a long term attitude for more than a century before). The basic American approach to the use of air power had developed shortly before the Gulf War, and fitted well both with the concepts of PDD 25 and the considerable American numerical, technological and electronic superiority in the air (including space systems) over all other countries including their NATO allies. The concept was based on a very powerful initial airstrike in the first 24 hours of a conflict, using stealth technology, electronic jamming and precision guided munitions, and aimed at high-value political and communications targets rather than military forces, with in intention of inflicting communications paralysis on the enemy. This method, sometimes characterised as 'Inside-Out Warfare,' was used first in the 1991 Gulf War as the preliminary to an extensive and largely conventional air campaign, followed by an equally largely conventional ground war. It was used next in August 1995 in Bosnia as 'Operation Deliberate Force' in a rather different way. A preliminary American air strike against the Serb forces of the Krajina, backed up by the first airstrikes conducted in anger by NATO as an organisation, destroyed the ability of the Serbs to resist effectively against an attack by Croat forces trained clandestinely by American civilian firms. The United States and some of its allies also conducted two further airstrikes, Operation Desert Strike in March 1996 and Operation Desert Fox in December

1998, against air defences, communications and other targets in Iraq, using a similar mix of precision guided munitions and cruise missiles.⁷

The most confident statement of the validity of this paralysis through air power before Kosovo came in 1996 with the announcement from the National Defense University in Washington of the concept of 'Rapid Dominance' through the use of such methods, with the objective of engendering 'shock and awe' in the enemy.⁸ As is not uncommon for a new method of warfare, various poor historical analogies have been advanced by American defence theorists in justification of this use of air power, including those equating such bombing to the legions of Rome, or 18th Century siege warfare. Except for a small number of commentators, the United States' media (and that of other countries including Britain) appears to have no grasp of the concept, equating bombing in the 1990s to that of the Second World War. Frequent warnings were also issued during the 1990s by airmen not to expect the impossible from air power. Political advantages to the United States included general popular support for bombing as a policy, and a low American casualty rate. Indeed, it was already apparent from the experience of 'Deliberate Force' that the United States' government viewed any combat deaths or captures among their aircrew as unacceptable, and would go to remarkable lengths to retrieve them safely.

The American-led NATO air campaign starting on 24th March 1999, Operation Allied Force, was in the tradition of this use of air power. But whereas the method depended heavily on an initial paralysing strike, American airmen were not on this occasion permitted, as they put it, 'to go for the head of the snake'. Instead, the United States pursued a coercion strategy through air power with far weaker forces and smaller targeting options. Objections to this within the United States military, muted during the war, later became overt. It was not until after more than a month that the United States and NATO developed the resources and rules of targeting engagement to pursue what its airmen regarded as a proper strategy. This had implications both for the relationship between a coercion strategy and propaganda on all sides, and for the manner in which both Yugoslav military and civil communications were attacked in the course of the campaign.⁹

⁷ John A. Warden III (1989) *the Air Campaign: Planning for Combat* (New York: Pergamon Brassey's); Shaun Clarke (ed.) (1998) *Testing the Limits* (Canberra: Air Power Studies Centre); Christopher Bellamy (1996) *Knights in White Armour* (London: Hutchinson), 116-119; Tim Ripley, (1999) *Operation Deliberate Force: The UN and NATO Campaign in Bosnia 1995* (Lancaster: CDISS).

⁸ Harlan Ullman, (1996) 'A New Defence Construct: "Rapid Dominance"', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institution for Defence Studies*, 141, 5, October 1996, 8-12.

⁹ Michael Rose, 'An Attack Force Without The Teeth For Victory', *The Sunday Times*, 28th March 1999; Editorial 'Stumbling Into War' *The Economist*, 27th March 1999; Edward Luttwak, 'Call This An Air War?',

The other major development in conceptions of the use of force and their link with communications and the media to emerge from NATO in the 1990s owed rather more to the British than the United States, chiefly through British leadership of the NATO commanding headquarters for its intervening ground forces, the ARRC.¹⁰ The British (with input from other NATO countries, including particularly the United States and Canada) spent much of the 1990s in an attempt to develop concepts of military force that would equate to new United Nations Organisation political concepts, particularly as expressed in Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's policy statement 'An Agenda For Peace' of 1992. British ideas were based on the UN concept, revived from being defunct since the Congo in 1960, of 'Chapter 6½ Operations', (sometimes also known as 'Second Generation Peacekeeping'), lying conceptually somewhere between peacekeeping by consent of all parties and outright war. The object was to provide ground forces that would not necessarily fight a war, but would be able to deploy rapidly to control a volatile political and military situation. After a first attempt with the doctrine of 'Wider Peacekeeping' of 1994, which proved unsatisfactory, the British produced in 1998 'Peace Support Operations', which distinguished between conventional UN blue-beret peacekeeping and 'peace enforcement', the threat or use of military use of force but in an impartial manner.¹¹

Clearly, the success of any such operations depended heavily on issues of perception and communication at all levels. From 1992 the ARRC Headquarters had begun to develop a concept of 'Media Operations' in response to the likely impact of the media on its deployments; and it had already conducted a largely successful peace enforcement and information campaign in Bosnia as the headquarters of I-FOR, the Implementation Force in Bosnia for the 1995 Dayton Accords.¹² The resolution of conflict in Bosnia in 1995 was very much a NATO conceptual model for Kosovo: an American-led bombing campaign leading to the agreed deployment of the ARRC Headquarters, this time leading the much smaller K-FOR

The Sunday Telegraph, 4th April 1999; *War In Europe – Episode 1* (see Note 3); Robert A. Pape (1996) *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).

¹⁰ Allied Command Europe (ACE) Rapid Reaction Corps. The ARRC is a multinational 'framework' headquarters, with a British commander and organised on British lines. This is not to deny the reliance of all other NATO members on United States' resources; in this case particularly the US Army's 4th Psychological Operations Group, which has no equivalent elsewhere in NATO.

¹¹ (1998) *Peace Support Operations: Joint Warfare Publication 3-50* (London: Ministry of Defence); Bellamy, *Knights in White Armour*, 149-170; John Hillen (1998) *Blue Helmets: The Strategy of UN Military Operations* (New York: Brassey's), 139-182; John Mackinlay and Randolph Kent (1997) 'Complex Emergencies Doctrine: The British Are Still Best', *Journal of The Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies*, 142, 2, April 1997, 39-44.

¹² R. C. L. Clifford and T. J. Wilton, 'Media Operations and the ARRC' in Stephen Badsey (ed.) (2000) *The Media and International Security* (London: Frank Cass), 11-33; Pascale Combelles Siegel (1998) *Target Bosnia: Integrating Information Activities in Peace Operations* (Washington DC: CCRP).

(Kosovo Force). The option consistently less favoured by NATO throughout was modelled on the 1991 Gulf War: a protracted air campaign to cover a substantial build-up of ground forces, followed by a ground war to secure Kosovo. Just as the conduct of the 1991 Gulf War was itself conservative in comparison with pre-war military theory, so despite late 1990s announcements concerning 'cyberwar' and 'information warfare', the actual events over Kosovo in 1999 gave only moderate support to the view that new communications technologies have promoted a radical departure from the strategies of earlier wars.¹³ Nevertheless, the combination of new military ideas was sufficient to promote confusion in the mind of anyone still thinking in terms of the Second World War, which formed a frequent cultural reference point for all sides throughout the conflict.

The final military development of the 1990s which had an impact on Kosovo, closely associated with developments in peacekeeping, was the admittedly tentative idea of 'humanitarian intervention' or even 'humanitarian war'.¹⁴ Taken much further as a concept by NATO over Kosovo in 1999, this was also acknowledged from its beginnings to be closely related to media representations of events.

These political and military developments were accompanied through the 1990s by developments in media and communications technology that also had a major effect on the political-military-media interaction over Kosovo. First was a trend traceable to the United States in the immediate aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War (and possibly earlier) which had spread to Europe by 1999, of a switch by major television companies from news to entertainment.¹⁵ In Britain this was symbolised in 1999 by Independent Television News dropping its flagship news programme 'News At Ten' which had run since 1969, in order to show late evening feature films without interruption. It was part of a wider trend, including newspapers, and involving complex social, cultural and commercial factors, which is characterised as the decline of 'old media' or 'old news' (network television, broadsheet newspapers and weekly current affairs journals) against the rise of 'new news' (satellite and

¹³ Roger Beaumont (1994) *War, Chaos and History* (Westport: Praeger), 173; Stephen Badsey (1999) 'The Conceptual Origins of Information Warfare' Global Transformation Research Group, 1999 Series, 4, January; James Adams (1998) *The Next World War* (London: Hutchinson); Chris Hables Gray (1997) *Postmodern War: The New Politics of Conflict* (London: Routledge).

¹⁴ Adam Roberts (1993) 'Humanitarian War: Military Intervention and Human Rights' *International Affairs*, 69, 3, 429-449; Robert Murray Lyman (1997) 'Possibilities for "Humanitarian War" by the International Community in Bosnia-Herzegovina 1992-1995,' *The Occasional Series Number 27*, Camberley: Strategic and Combat Studies Institute; Nicholas Hopkinson (1996) 'Humanitarian Intervention?' Wilton Park Paper 110, London: HMSO; Noam Chomsky (1999) *The New Military Humanism: Lessons From Kosovo* (London: Pluto).

¹⁵ Arthur Kent (1996) *Risk and Redemption* (Viking: Toronto); Editorial 'Britain's Media Giants' and 'UKTV Blues', *The Economist* 12th December 1998; Editorial 'Here Is The News', *The Economist* 4th July 1998; Peter

cable television, television and radio chat shows, tabloid newspapers) as the principal means by which most people obtain their understanding of the world.¹⁶ Added to this has been the marked decline of the professional or specialist ‘defence correspondent’, the increasing youth and inexperience of military affairs of television or newspaper staff, and the ‘information stream’ offered on a global and continuous basis to media outlets.

The final significant development has been the establishment in 1992 of the World Wide Web, and the corresponding increase through the decade in Internet use for civilian and commercial purposes.¹⁷ This, together with the common use, at least in the developed world, of video cameras and mobile telephones promoted the arguments that ‘everyone is a journalist’, at least potentially, and that ‘the media are everywhere’. Whereas in the past the media had conducted a critical ‘gatekeeper’ function by literally mediating the news, multiple alternative methods by which individuals might obtain raw news data had come into existence. The issue has then become one of the credibility and reliability of such ‘new news’ sources.

From these developments, it was broadly predictable that the NATO military strategy over Kosovo would not be well understood or reported by the international and western news media. But the fragmentation of the news media, together with the rise of ‘new news’ and of use of the Internet, would also give the ‘Media War’ a degree of greater speed and interpretability, to the extent of moving the political-military-media interaction to a new level as had been seen in the Gulf War. It was also highly likely that, given NATO’s preference for an air war and sophisticated understanding of ‘media operations’, together with certain advantages enjoyed by the Yugoslav government, this interpermeability would not overcome the ability of governments on all sides to control and regulate the news flow. To this should be added the well-established frames of reference held by all sides before the start of the bombing, and developed over some years, which provided a context from which it was virtually impossible to report objectively.¹⁸ This problem once more raised the issue of credibility, which was central to the political positions of all sides over Kosovo.

J. Humphreys (1996) *Mass Media and Media Policy in Western Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

¹⁶ ‘Old News Ain’t Beat Yet’, *The Economist*, 18th May 1996; Philip M. Taylor (1997) *Global Communications, International Affairs and the Media since 1945* (London: Routledge), 1-26; Susan L. Carruthers (2000) *The Media At War* (London: MacMillan), 201-205.

¹⁷ Brian Winston (1998) *Media Technology and Society: A History – From the Telegraph to the Internet* (London: Routledge), 321-336; Philip M. Taylor (1999) ‘Propaganda and the Web War’, *The World Today*, June 1999, 10-12.

¹⁸ Editorial ‘Too Many Truths’ (1999) *British Journalism Review*, 10, 2, 3-6.

The Kosovo Conflict and Media Interaction

The extent of material generated by the media in the course of the Kosovo conflict, including website transcripts of press conferences and briefings, and reports from within Kosovo and Serbia themselves, made it possible to record the public image of events – if not the actual events themselves – with unusual detail and precision. In addition to its own official media headed by Tanjug and by RTS, the Republic of Yugoslavia also had a number of tolerated (rather than strictly independent) media outlets that were anti-government without being pro-NATO. The most famous of these, Radio B92 Belgrade, was closed down at the start of the bombing on 24th March, having its transmitter confiscated, but resumed ‘transmission’ almost immediately through a website in Serbian and English, with technical support coming from Amsterdam. On 29th March, this website carried the transcript of an interview recorded in London with Foreign Secretary Robin Cook. The end came most dramatically on 2nd April with a notice posted on B92’s website that at 9 a.m. the police had arrived to remove its director, Sasa Mirkovic, and replace him with a government appointee, after which the station remained closed.

In what became known as ‘the war of the web’, the opposing sides vied with each other throughout the conflict to place their version of events in cyberspace. In addition to the official Yugoslav sites, students at Belgrade University volunteering their services to the government found a way of tracking and recording frequent visitors to the NATO website; and on 13th May they sent out an e-mail inviting those users to hit their own ‘Yugoslav Anti-NATO Organisation’ website for a different perspective.¹⁹ Independent news sources from within Kosovo also supplied material to external websites. The most famous of these was the website run by the ‘Cybermonk’, Father Sava Janjic of the Serbian Orthodox Visoki Decani Monastery in Kosovo. Pristina’s radio and television station RTPSAT broadcast a daily news report in Albanian on the internet, while Kosovo’s Albanian language *Radio 21* continued even to broadcast music over the web. Montenegro welcomed foreign reporters and encouraged the re-broadcast of overseas news by privately-owned radio stations, seeing this as part of its own broad political strategy to resist domination from Belgrade. When in mid-April the Serb-dominated Yugoslav Army in Montenegro tried to close down the tolerated radio stations and introduce censorship on the Serbian pattern, this was successfully blocked by the Montenegrin government. In addition to the formal websites there were also Internet chat-rooms, with contributions apparently from private Serbian citizens (although often

¹⁹ The e-mail address of this venture was info@antinato.org.yu; and the website was <http://www.antinato.org.yu>. As may have been guessed, the present author was a recipient of one of their e-mails.

appearing in English), which provided a nightly running commentary on NATO bombing.²⁰ One website even provided a real-time camera view of a main street in Belgrade. Evaluating the accuracy and credibility of this material was virtually impossible, both for the western media and for others.

The degree of apparent openness on all sides marked the Kosovo conflict as different from most previous wars. This was reinforced by the NATO position that it was not at war (although this ran in contradiction to the repeated evoking of the Second World War as a motif). In Britain particularly, the government noticeably made use of ‘new media’, with appearances by ministers on radio chat shows, breakfast television, and in prepared interviews or articles for tabloid newspapers. There was no move to the kind of media ‘war footing’ that had been seen in the 1991 Gulf War: no attempt to take war films off television or restrict music on radio. Even the notoriously bellicose British tabloid press was subdued after the first day’s headlines. Unlike other recent conflicts, prisoners of war also never became a major media issue. On 1st April, RTS showed three captured American soldiers, ostensibly taken prisoner while on routine patrol, with a later announcement that they would be tried by a military court for war crimes.²¹ After the expected angry reaction from the United States this came to nothing, and the men were eventually released at the end of April in another flurry of publicity after interventions by President Kiprianou of Cyprus and then by Jesse Jackson.

After the collapse of the Rambouillet talks on 19th March, international reporters had a choice of where to locate themselves for the forthcoming conflict. In 1990-1991 for the Gulf the main contest had been to achieve a ‘front line’ place, and this had remained true to a large extent of the fighting in Bosnia 1992-1995. But on this occasion, many senior journalists and their editors judged that the focus of the story would be found at NATO Headquarters in Brussels. Other senior reporters went to Belgrade, where they had very comparable experiences to those in Baghdad in 1991, including harassment and threatened expulsion in the first few days, and being escorted to report on damage allegedly caused by NATO. BBC reporter Jacky Rowland, taken under escort on Sunday 23rd May from Belgrade to Korisa, which NATO had bombed one day previously as a military target causing casualties to a refugee encampment, confessed the impossibility of determining the facts in the face of Yugoslav press-management. In a war reporting first, John Simpson of the BBC had

²⁰ For an example see Taylor, ‘Propaganda and the Web War’ (see Note 17).

²¹ The men were identified at the time as members of Task Force Able Sentry, part of UNPREDEP, the UN Preventive Deployment Force in Macedonia,

established by 14th April an Internet chat-room from Belgrade, replying to questions including a number from within Yugoslavia itself.

A marked difference between Kosovo and previous conflicts was that a British government under the strain of a war found an unusual degree of solidarity among the news media. On 14th April, the day of the Djakovica tractor bombing, John Simpson reported his impression from interviews in Belgrade that President Milosevic was 'stronger than ever as a leader', but that support for him should decline when the bombing halted. Shortly afterwards London newspaper journalists received one or more confidential Whitehall briefings – perhaps nothing more than an unguarded remark – attacking Simpson and the BBC for being insufficiently patriotic. In previous wars, notably Suez 1956 and the Falklands 1982, the BBC had tended to be more critical of the government than the print media, and government attacks on its patriotism had produced echoes of support the newspapers, and also from many members of parliament. This time, on the contrary, major newspapers ran editorials in support of the BBC. Also, rather than receiving cross-party support, the Prime Minister faced a hostile parliamentary question on 21st April, which was shown by the BBC itself on that day's television news.²²

The two major related problems in terms of media interaction for NATO in conducting its campaign were lack of co-ordination between its military and media strategies, and lack of resources to cope with the demands of a modern 'Media War'. Given the experiences of the 1990s, and the corresponding levels of preparedness of the ARRC, this lack of resources came as a surprise after the bombing campaign opened. The Prime Minister's Press Secretary Alastair Campbell, speaking in July 1999, recalled that "Neither at NATO nor in capitals did we fully factor into our thinking and planning the need for the kind of media operation that was going to be required. NATO thought capitals could cope. Capitals just assumed NATO had a communications outfit to deal with the biggest story in the world".²³ Dr Shea at NATO was under-resourced and lacked institutional authority until after the Djakovica tractor convoy bombing. On 16th April, following a telephone offer of help from Prime Minister Blair to President Bill Clinton, Alastair Campbell was invited by Secretary General Javier Solana to visit NATO Headquarters in order to improve its media

²² *Hansard* 21st April 1999 Prime Minister's Question Time, Question 2 (80323) Mr Edward Garnier (Harborough); Editorial 'Too Many Truths' (1999) *British Journalism Review*, 10, 2, 3-6.

²³ Alastair Campbell (1999) 'Communications Lessons for NATO, the Military and the Media', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies*, 144, 4, August 1999, 332; *War in Europe – Episode 2* (see Note 3).

operation. According to Campbell, 'By the time of the Chinese Embassy bombing' of 7th May, 'we'd all learned our lesson'.²⁴

While opinion poll figures suggested that support for NATO actions among the wider British people remained solid throughout the campaign, an important section of elite public opinion, with access to the mass communications media, was strongly opposed to NATO's actions. This opposition became prominent towards the second half of April, based on the argument that NATO's actions were misguided or ineffectual: bombing was not working, a ground war was politically impossible, while Serb ethnic cleansing in Kosovo had succeeded. These arguments were to some extent reflected in the much more muted criticisms given by General Klaus Naumann, the retiring Chairman of the NATO Military Committee, on 4th May.²⁵ The playwright and actor Harold Pinter,²⁵ a strong opponent of NATO's actions, turning himself into a journalist, appearing at the daily London press conference on 30th April. Pinter followed this up with an article in the *Sunday Telegraph* and on 4th May a half-hour television slot for himself on BBC television. The opposition campaign peaked on Saturday 22nd May with a special television programme constructed as a mock trial of NATO's strategy, in which the prosecution was led by Bob Marshall-Andrews QC, Labour MP for Medway since 1997. A majority (61 per cent) of the studio audience supported the motion that NATO had 'blundered' into the Kosovo crisis, so making the situation worse.²⁶ This attempt by opponents of NATO's action to transfer the debate from the conventional political arena to television was a significant one, if ultimately unsuccessful.

The Bombing of RTS Belgrade

The pattern of events which shows perhaps most clearly the interaction between politics, military strategy and the media during the Kosovo conflict is that which culminated in the controversial airstrike against RTS Belgrade television centre in the early hours of 23rd April, killing a number of civilian employees. Western reporters judged Kosovo too dangerous for them to enter at the start of the conflict, influenced both by the dangers of NATO bombing and by the 76 journalists killed in former Yugoslavia 1991-1995 (some of them deliberately targeted by Serb forces). As the conflict lengthened more reporters did get

²⁴ Campbell, 'Communications Lessons for NATO, the Military and the Media', 333.

²⁵ Press Conference, General Klaus Naumann, NATO Headquarters, 4th May 1999; Simon Jenkins, 'Three Strikes and Out', *The Times* 21st April 1999; General Sir Michael Rose, 'Crass, Crude and Confused', *The Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 23rd April 1999.

²⁶ *NATO On Trial* first transmitted UK Channel 4, 21st May 1999.

in to Kosovo, but few were able to observe the events of ethnic cleansing closely, and more than one was killed, injured or temporarily detained.

The absence of western reporters from Kosovo particularly at the start of the conflict meant that Belgrade controlled the news from the region, including visual images. The Yugoslav government was able to draw attention to episodes of NATO bombs and missiles hitting civilian targets in both Serbia and Kosovo, while at the same time starving NATO's preferred media story about ethnic cleansing of visual images, so controlling the international media agenda to an extent that not only Prime Minister Blair found frustrating. Both NATO's main justification for its actions, and the main line taken at all its press briefings, was that it was acting to prevent ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. According to Alastair Campbell, he and his fellows were simply unable 'to force this pictureless story onto the news agendas'.²⁷ The first videotape of Albanians being killed by Serb forces, filmed privately in Djakovica by wedding photographer Shpepin Bytyci on 27th March, did not reach the west until handed to the BBC in Tirana on 17th April. The conclusion from the Prime Minister's Office to the Ministry of Defence was that visual images, by television or other methods, were what would matter in the future: 'No Pictures – No News!'²⁸

In addition, Tanjug and the other organs of Yugoslav government information kept up an endless series of claims about NATO. To take a typical day, on 9th April Tanjug repeated stories from the Greek newspaper *Athinaiki* that an entire German brigade had deserted in Macedonia, and that to date 32 NATO aircraft had been shot down.²⁹ While few of these stories had any credibility, in the absence of any other news Dr Shea with his limited NATO press resources was obliged to respond to them, becoming increasingly preoccupied with the preservation of NATO's credibility. On 7th April, Yugoslavia closed its Kosovo borders for three days, forcing refugees back from their destinations in Albania and Macedonia; and then mocked NATO claims of substantial refugee numbers as propaganda fictions, as reporting teams were faced with almost empty camps. That evening, western reporters and camera crews were also escorted round a devastated Pristina; and back in Belgrade they were encouraged to film and photograph a human chain of 'NATO Targets' across a main bridge. The same day saw an outpouring of anti-NATO propaganda from RTS.

²⁷ Campbell, 'Communications Lessons for NATO, the Military and the Media', 35.

²⁸ Ibid, 34; Oona Muirhead, (1999) 'My Job: At the Sharp End of the Media Operation' *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies*, 144, 4, 37-43; *Jane's International Defense Review* 32, September 1999, 3.

²⁹ Tanjug press releases at <http://serbia-info.com> for 9th April 1999; 'Analysis: Propaganda War Hots Up' BBC News <http://news.bbc.co.uk> at 16.55 p.m. 9th April 1999.

At next day's NATO press conference, 8th April, spokesman Air Commodore David Wilby warned that RTS would be a target for attack, unless western programmes were given six hours of uncensored airtime daily, divided as three hours between noon and 6 p.m., and three hours between 6 p.m. and midnight. According to Air Commodore Wilby, the justification for this was that RTS had 'filled the airwaves with hate and lies over the years and especially now. It is therefore a legitimate target in this campaign,' and that the same transmitters were being used for military purposes.³⁰ Next evening, 9th April, NATO airstrikes hit a radio and television transmitter near Pristina, forcing Radio Belgrade to use UHF transmitters, and raids against radio and television relay stations continued over the next weeks. The idea that transmitters broadcasting hate propaganda or incentives to murder and ethnic cleansing were legitimate targets was not new to the Kosovo conflict; the issue had first been raised in the light of experience in Rwanda, Somalia and Bosnia.³¹ Against this were legal considerations of freedom of speech, and NATO's claim to hold the moral high ground. The Yugoslav success in the 'Media War' was forcing NATO into a controversial position.

On 21st April Slobodan Milosevic stole the thunder of the NATO 50th Anniversary speeches in New York by giving his only interview of the war to the western media. He talked for an hour in English to the small Houston-based television station KHOU TV, from which the major network rebroadcast segments. Milosevic's very first answer went to the heart of the media's role in the war and the issue of credibility. 'Your government', he told the American people, 'is running two wars against Yugoslavia. Against our people. One is military war and the other is media war or if you like it better, propaganda war. Propaganda war started long before military war, and its goal is to Satanise this country, our people, leadership of this country, individuals, and whatever was needed to create artificially of course, public opinion in United States which will be supportive to aggression they committed later'.³²

This was the context of political-military-media interaction in which, on the following night, a NATO airstrike targeted RTS' main studio in Belgrade, taking it off the air for five

³⁰ NATO Press Conference 8th April 1999 <http://www.nato.int>.

³¹ Stephen Badsey (1997) 'The Media and UN "Peacekeeping" Since the Gulf War' *The Journal of Conflict Studies*, 17,1,7-27; Mark Thompson (1994) *Forging War: the Media in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina* (London: Article 19); J. F. Mezl (1997) 'When Switching Channels Isn't Enough' *Foreign Affairs*, 76, 6, 15-20; Richard Connaughton (2000) 'The Media of Hate' in Badsey, *The Media and International Security*, 39-48.

³² Interview with President Slobodan Milosevic by Dr Ron Hatchett, transmitted on Houston-KHOU-TV 9 p.m. – 10 p.m. CDT 21st April 1999, text on KHOU-TV website <http://www.khou.com>; the official Yugoslav transcript of the interview on <http://www.serbia-info.com> for 25th April 1999 is essentially the same, except that it corrected Milosevic's fractured English, and also deleted some remarks comparing him to Hitler.

hours until 7 a.m. The studio included the satellite facilities used by western journalists to send their reports. The incident brought sharply into focus NATO's claims to legitimacy and legality, with Amnesty International coming out against the action, and the International Committee of the Red Cross expressing its concern. Condemnations were also received from The International Federation of Journalists in Brussels, *Reporters sans Frontiers* in Paris, and both the Committee to Protect Journalists and the Overseas Press Club in New York. On 30th April the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, also expressed concerns about NATO's bombing policy in an official report, which noted that 'large numbers of civilians have incontestably been killed' and that 'the principle of proportionality must be adhered to'.³³ On his return from the NATO 50th Anniversary commemorations in the United States, Prime Minister Blair also faced questions in the House of Commons. One in particular came from Martin Bell MP, the former BBC war reporter who had covered both the Gulf War and Bosnia. Bell argued that for the first time NATO had attacked a target knowing that this must cause civilian casualties, and that in doing so 'NATO crossed a Rubicon which, in my judgement should not have been crossed'.³⁴ NATO continued to target relay and transmitting stations only for the rest of the air campaign, but never struck a civilian media target again. On 26th May, the European Telecommunication Satellite Organisation meeting in Paris decided to discontinue relaying RTS transmissions, on the grounds that it showed hate propaganda. Exactly a week later, on 2nd June, the International Court of Justice declined to accept, on technical legal grounds of its own competence, a Yugoslav petition that NATO bombing was a war crime, while remaining seized of the case.

The Conflict Resolution

Having generally failed to explain the events and conduct of the war, the mass western news media equally failed to explain the peace settlement that emerged from the first two weeks of June. Since the media were largely excluded from both the diplomatic negotiations and from the 'military technical agreement' which allowed K-FOR peacefully into Kosovo, the Yugoslav government had little difficulty in portraying itself and its armed forces as undefeated. The NATO military strategy regarding Kosovo owed more to ideas and experiences developed through the 1990s, and less to new revolutionary concepts, than was apparent to many early pundits. But in respect of the media, particularly the role of 'new

³³ 'Report on the Human Rights Situation Involving Kosovo Submitted By Mary Robinson High Commissioner For Human Rights' Geneva 30th April 1999 OHCHR/99/30/A.

³⁴ *Hansard* 26th April 1999, Statement by the Prime Minister, Question by Martin Bell (Tatton).

news' and the Internet, there had clearly been a major change in the political-military-media relationship. Possibly Kosovo stands in relation to these new media as the Korean War (1950-53), the world's first true 'television war', stood in relationship to what was then the relatively immature phenomenon of television news.³⁵ If so, then the obvious question exists of what adjustments in thinking will be required before a possible 'Internet Vietnam', and what such a war would be like for all sides.

³⁵ I owe this point to Professor Philip M. Taylor.