



THE SPIN THAT TRICKED EUROPE INTO WAR

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How NATO's handling of the media during the Kosovo crisis was characterised by news management, propaganda and censorship.

By Andy Wasley.

Writing in a Sunday newspaper in May, Tony Blair spoke of Britain having a free press, of being accountable over NATO's bombing of Serbia. He emphasised that as a result of NATO's respect of international law, Slobodan Milosevic had been indicted as a war criminal. What he failed to mention was that he himself may soon be indicted for war crimes, that a dossier accusing him, the Foreign Secretary Robin Cook and other leading Government officials of crimes against humanity had been handed into the war crimes tribunal in the Hague.

The little known Cambridge based Movement for the Advancement of International Criminal Law had compiled the dossier as the text of the indictment against Milosevic was being read out by the US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in Washington.

This was the first time in modern international history that a prominent Western leader had been formally accused of war crimes, yet it was judged to be so unimportant that it failed to make the pages of all but one national newspaper. Television and radio ignored it entirely. It was, as one leading war critic suggested, "As if it hadn't happened."

This was understandable. The Labour administration had clearly heeded a lesson learnt by previous governments; that fighting a war without the control and support of a sympathetic media is political suicide.

The result was a four month 'war of spin' characterised by information suppression, media manipulation and news management. London, Brussels and Washington worked overtime throughout the conflict to set the media agenda - sustaining the propaganda informing the world that the cause was a just one, the attacks on Serbia and subsequent occupation of Kosovo a necessary evil. The resulting disparity between newspaper and television headlines and what was occurring on the ground in Kosovo was both remarkable and alarming.

Rather than acknowledge or question this the media, for the most part, simply played along. Journalists, with a few notable exceptions, relied almost exclusively upon the output of NATO's media machine

- press releases, briefings by appropriate spokespeople and blurred footage shot by aircrews ten thousand feet above the ground - to fill the monumental amount of column inches and airtime given over to the conflict.

This illusion of saturation coverage obscured the reality that the media (both knowingly and otherwise) acted primarily as a mouthpiece for NATO's campaign and is used as evidence by NATO apologists to argue that there had been sufficiently objective reporting throughout the crisis.

Throughout the bombing campaign (and even after NATO's illegal occupation) most reporting engaged the question of 'how long?' rather than 'why?'. Virtually nowhere, early on at least, was the campaign questioned on grounds of legality or morality. This was despite it being widely known that Tony Blair, in encouraging his NATO counterparts to support the bombing, was effectively inciting a violation of international humanitarian law.

The diplomatic sham of the Rambouillet negotiations, which, according to some critics, were deliberately flawed by NATO in order to spur on the use of force in the Balkans, was never fully analysed by the media.

The all too apparent (staged?) lack of common ground between US and British diplomats provided Milosevic with more than enough evidence to assume that at this stage, without a cohesive public face and US support, Blair's call for bombing would never be heeded. The uncertain (manufactured?) divide between London and Washington gave the Serbian leader carte blanche to continue operations inside Kosovo, providing the necessary justification for NATO to commence bombing.

Such a scenario was almost entirely ignored, reports instead focusing on Milosevic's failure to attend negotiations in person (not surprising, considering that indictment for war crimes was imminent) and the unwillingness of both the Serbs and Kosovo Albanians to agree on a compromise route.

There was little discussion of NATO's own uncompromising stance, that a proposal to deploy a small UN peacekeeping unit in the region to oversee any temporary settlement had been previously agreed to by Milosevic, yet rejected by NATO (Blair specifically) as 'insufficient'. Had he chosen not to ignore it, this fundamental Serb concession could have averted the bombing.

As one senior Foreign Office source has since privately admitted, "From where we were sitting, it was clear that a decision [by NATO] had effectively been made long before sitting around the negotiating table [at Rambouillet]; by this time it was a case of comply or be bombed."

When Milosevic later commented to Richard Holbrook, "You are a superpower, you can do what you want", during the US envoys 'last ditch' attempt at peace in

Belgrade, the media clearly missed the point.



This child was injured by a cluster bomb - weapons which in Vietnam and Cambodia directly lead to the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians. Such weapons frequently fail to detonate on impact and can remain undetected for years after.

SPINNING THE BOMBING

NATO's decision to bomb Serbia on the 24th March without an appropriate UN resolution is arguably comparable to Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbour in 1941 - without justification,

a violent act of war. At least, this is how some critics viewed it. Such a perspective failed to receive coverage in the media. It simply played along.

In the days after the bombing began, images of bedraggled refugees fleeing Kosovo were screened universally, not only to impart to the world the sheer scale of the crisis unfolding, but to justify the West's use of force in the region. What the images failed to portray accurately was that a great many of the refugees were in fact fleeing the NATO bombs rather than the Serbian death squads NATO accused of exclusively causing the exodus.

The evidence of aid workers suggesting that many refugees had fled in fear of being killed by NATO failed to make the news schedules, a NATO spokesman claiming that "Of course opponents [to the bombing] are going to say that." He'd clearly not been privy to the written testimony of hundreds of refugees secretly collected by several aid workers with Balkans First.

Maria Stopas and Emily Longmoor had spent two weeks interviewing as many displaced Kosovo Albanians as possible; they estimate that at least two thirds were equally, or more afraid of, NATO than of the Serbians. Most gave the NATO bombing as their prime motivation for fleeing Kosovo.

Television cameras openly filmed NATO warplanes taking off from the decks of naval craft in the Mediterranean, they ignored the accounts of the refugees who had witnessed the destruction of their homes by 'astray' NATO bombs.

For all Blair's talk of a free press, of being accountable, where was the balanced, uncensored

reporting?, where was the alternative?

The coverage which did find itself onto the six o'clock news was enough to confirm critics fears - that its covertly selective nature had been deliberately designed to obscure the truth.

Graphic pictures portraying the victims of alleged Serbian atrocities were screened freely. In contrast, the charred remains of Serbian families blown to bits by NATO missiles were 'edited', deemed too offensive for public viewing. The media played along.

The very language employed by NATO spokespeople was designed to shift the focus of attention away from those responsible for scenes, which in another context, would only be described as atrocities. 'Blunder' became one favourite, with Jamie Shea, NATO's cockney spokesman, employing it regularly to defend the 'occasional yet inevitable' civilian casualties.

Rather than verbally illustrate the terrible carnage caused when a stray bomb lands in a residential street, 'blunder' conjures up all sorts of images of schoolboys comics' generals making another mistake - 'whoops, there goes another, must do better next time.'

'Collateral damage' became the ideal substitute for the desolation caused when a bomb fell on a school rather than on the munitions factory 'confirmed as nearby'. NATO claimed from the start that it only had a bombing policy of striking targets 'of primary importance to the Serbian leadership and infrastructure'. There was, according to official spokespeople, no policy of targeting civilians.

Again, the use of language cleverly obscured the true nature of the campaign. NATO may not have set out to deliberately machine gun civilians on the street, but if they happened to be in the vicinity of 'legitimate' targets then so be it.

When the headquarters of Serbia's leading television station was hit, twelve workers lost their lives (producers, technicians and the tea lady were among those killed). NATO claimed this to be a 'regrettable consequence'. Knowing that TV stations usually require a twenty four hour staff presence, can the policy of not targeting civilians still be believed?

Equally, when the Chinese embassy was hit, resulting in several deaths, the true consequences the action were hidden. Television pictures illustrating the structural damage to the building were shown, the bodies of two passing Serbian school children were not. The media played along.

Closer to home, BBC executives in London, when faced with the prospect of an anti war debate being held in their building (ironically, in the National Union of Journalists room), did everything in their power to cancel the meeting, informing the principle speaker, Alan Simpson MP, that the event was 'off', and forcing

it to be rescheduled to a nearby university campus.

More covertly, when an election broadcast for the Socialist Labour party was found to contain graphic images of victims of a 'blundered' NATO bombing mission, BBC executives took the decision to cut the offending images; referring the issue to the Independent Television Commission, which immediately upheld the decision. According to a spokesman, "Such images, if allowed to be used in the context of politics, and at a time such as this, could be seen as unacceptably undermining the integrity of the ruling [Labour] administration."

Clearly, the broadcasting of scenes which visually illustrate the human cost of the NATO bombing campaign was seen as unpalatable and outside the margins of decency that the BBC so vigorously upholds. Questioning the integrity of the Labour party (it was the Labour party, was it not, that ordered British jets into action over Belgrade?) clearly steps beyond the boundaries of 'fair play' and 'unbias' reporting that the BBC constructs its reputation upon.

When asked why there had been coverage of the substantial anti war demonstrations in London and Liverpool (an estimated 20,000 had turned out at one), the only suggestion the BBC press office could suggest was that the organisers had failed to properly publicise the events.

The few journalists who did question the bombing campaign quickly found themselves isolated and ridiculed. When the BBC's 'Today' presenter, John Humphrys, said on air that the bombing of Serbia was 'a mess', his comments were compared to asking 'What happens if it doesn't work?' at the time of the D-Day landings. Despite publicly supporting Humphrys' approach, BBC chiefs secretly axed a travel documentary examining Serbia, as one senior producer put it, "Openly signalling which side of the fence the corporation would be sitting upon.

When John Pilger, writing in the Guardian, spoke out against what he saw as the Western media's self censorship, he found himself at the centre of a number of allegations ranging from being 'ever madder', 'a liar' and a plain 'propagandist'. His claim that up to thirty eight NATO warplanes had been shot down (official NATO estimates put the figure at two), was roundly criticised for being incorrect.

Anyone seriously researching the issue of how many warplanes had been lost would have known that the true figure is nearer twenty than the mere two widely reported. A telephone call to NATO HQ would confirm that 'Two US planes have been shot down, [we] cannot confirm or deny that a number of others have been lost.' Apparently, journalists needed to contact NATO countries individually to clarify further enquiries.

Do this, and the figure rises significantly.

The alleged Serb massacre at Racak, which

spurred NATO's intervention in Kosovo, was neither questioned or investigated by the media.

NATO defended its public statistic by stating that not only were losses bad for moral (ie political survival) but by pointing out that its spokespeople answer specifically what they are asked - in most instances, how many aircraft have been 'shot down'. The figure did not include aircraft 'damaged', 'missing' or otherwise unaccounted for'.

The example illustrated both the selective nature of the NATO media machine and the press's disturbing reliance upon it. No one, it seems, bothered to check beyond the briefings stating that only the two aircraft had been lost.

Similarly, when Ian Craig approached the media in May with a story suggesting that Greek hoteliers were planning to sue NATO for a loss of tourist earnings, it was turned down on the basis of being 'without substance' as the number of Western travellers visiting Greece had in fact increased. This was true, but only in so far as the figure had increased on the previous month's paltry statistics - overall, tourist visits to Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean were at an all time low' partly because of the region's proximity to the Balkans war zone.

Editors had telephoned the Greek national tourist office and NATO (both falsely claimed that the story had been fabricated by Serb sympathisers in an attempt to cause a further rift between an already strained Athens and Brussels) but failed to contact the hoteliers themselves. Neither had they attempted to question in what context the tourist statistics had 'increased'.

By the time Craig had pointed this out, the original issue of the hoteliers suing NATO (an unprecedented action) had been overshadowed by an argument over the interpretation of statistics. As one reporter put it, "NATO spin effectively killed the story - the national press, knowingly or otherwise, assisted in the process."

MODERN IMPERIALISM 'NOT TO BLAME'

When journalists suggested that British and US foreign policy objectives might account for NATO's keenness to bomb Serbia, rather than any genuine humanitarian agenda, NATO spokespeople denounced such suggestions as 'mere muck raking' and attempted to 'kill' the stories.

One senior Foreign Office official claimed that any journalist suggesting that imperialistic overseas policy objectives should be used to explain the Kosovo crisis should be sacked: "Such theories belong in the history books. They might explain wars in the 19th century, but not in the present day."

Such a response came despite William Cohen, US Secretary of Defence, clearly illustrating NATO's economic position in the Balkans last year: "Expanding into Eastern Europe spreads political stability, and with that spread of stability there is a prospect to attract investment."

Michel Chossudovsky, Professor of Economics at the University of Ottawa, captured the mood of many anti war commentators when he explained the contemporary Balkans problem in terms of expansionist commercial and economic objectives: "International financial institutions and creditors [are attempting] to subject the Balkan economies to massive privatisation and the dismantling of the public sector. While attention is focused on troop movements and cease fires, the Balkans is busy being transformed into a safe heaven for free enterprise."

Such a move would generate-potentially limitless revenue for Western business and governments, the interest charged on loans from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) enough to eventually outweigh any costs incurred in waging a bombing campaign against Milosevic. When Chossudovsky argued, with evidence, that the "cultural, ethnic and religious divisions are highlighted, presented dogmatically as the sole cause of the [Balkan] crisis when in reality they are the consequences of a much deeper process of economic and political fracturing", he perhaps presented the single most coherent anti war perspective in fruition, yet the media simply ignored it.

As Kevin Dowling pointed out, both the US and Britain have long regarded the Balkans a staple region in which to expand the principles of free market economics; since the Dayton Accords ended the last round of conflict in the region the number of Western multinational companies operating there is estimated to have trebled.

Serbia and Kosovo strategically hold some of the world's richest resources in terms of mineral-extraction - last year Greece signed a multi billion dollar deal with Serbia to expand a joint mining operation which could generate over a trillion dollars in export revenue, in part explaining the Greek Government's reluctance to bomb Serbia.

The Anglo-American wing of mining conglomerate, RTZ, also operates mines in both Macedonia and Bulgaria, its operations in the Balkans theatre under threat as long as ethnic conflict continues to proliferate. A leaked memo from a senior RTZ official clearly illustrates the company's position: 'If the [NATO] mission in the Balkans fails to smooth the unrest out, and the current violence continues, [RTZ] will seriously have to reassess its involvement in the region. The Foreign Office cannot seem to reassure us for the future.'

Despite such suggestive evidence, and growing proof that economic objectives might at least in part explain

NATO's eagerness to use military force against Serbia (there are over 35 other wars currently raging on the planet, many of them also driven by ethnic division), neither the media or politicians acknowledged so, stating that any story which suggested so was 'without foundation.'

The newspapers which did entertain the idea mentioned the region's economic potential but failed to highlight the political implications.

WAR CRIMES - A KLA HOAX?

'Without foundation' was also applied by NATO to suggestions that alleged Serbian massacres were being 'overplayed' and manipulated in the media in an attempt to justify the bombing, deflect attention away from mounting 'blunders' and alleged atrocities carried out by the Kosovo Liberation Army.

When John Sweeney in the Observer exposed how Serbian police had brutally massacred a number of Kosovan Albanians in the village of Little Krushe in late March, the piece was received, justifiably, as seminal proof that Serbian atrocities had indeed taken place. There was however, no coverage of emerging evidence suggesting that previous alleged Serb killings were being 'set up' by KLA fighters, eager to employ such tactics as propaganda and speed up NATO's intervention in the conflict.

Less than a week after the Observer's 'Little Krushe' report, Reid Irving highlighted how KLA fighters may have hoaxed the widely reported 'January 16th' massacre at the village of Racak. According to Irving' after a gun battle between KLA fighters and Serbian police had ceased, 22 bodies were discovered in a shallow grave on the outskirts of the village. Foreign journalists were invited to the site by KLA soldiers and told that whilst the battle had raged, civilians had been rounded up and shot by the Serbian police. The journalists, suspicious of the amount of time that the Serbs would have had to carry out such an act, claimed that they were unable to obtain reliable testimony as to the exact chronology of events from the KLA.

Joined by pathologists from Belarus and Finland, they reported that the bodies had had clothing changed, that injuries didn't match damage to clothing and that additional bullets had been fired at close range to give the impression of a massacre. Although, as Irving points out, the jury may still be out as to the legitimacy of the alleged Racak massacre, the element of doubt is significant as it was this event which brought about the chain of diplomacy that resulted in NATO bombs falling on Belgrade. Racak spurred the US and Britain into taking action against Milosevic, and, as historian Thomas Craig has suggested, "prompted the first use of the term genocide to describe events in the former Yugoslavia - a term used by NATO leaders to persuade the public that force was now necessary."

When the Chinese embassy was bombed, the true consequences of the action were hidden. Television pictures illustrating the structural damage to the building were beamed around the world, the bodies of two passing Serbian school children were not.

Contemporary genocide is more typically associated with the extensive crimes against humanity committed in Cambodia, Rwanda or Turkey than those presented from the entire Balkans history. No attempt to question such over zealous use of the term was made by the media. There were no reports on the nine o'clock news suggesting that Racak might have been a hoax.

Comparable selective reporting was applied to an article which appeared in LM magazine investigating the circumstances surrounding the now famous ITN pictures of a starved Bosnian Muslim, Fikret Alic, apparently caged behind barbed wire at the Bosnian Serb run 'Trnopolje' camp in 1992. These images became the most powerful symbol of the Bosnian war and according to NATO, provided evidence of Serb run 'concentration camps', - evidence which spurred the US, UK and other Western nations to contemplate the use of force in the Balkans theatre.

The article, written by Thomas Deichmann, suggested that the camp was no 'Nazi-style concentration camp', that in fact the ITN camera crew had filmed the 'prisoners' through barbed wire belonging to an adjacent agricultural compound, rather than wire encircling the camp, providing a misleading picture of the situation to the world.

Despite being published across Europe, when LM magazine ran the piece in Britain, ITN demanded that all copies be pulped, that the editors apologise and that damages be paid. When LM refused, in the words of one senior editor, "to be gagged in an unprecedented move to silence the independent media", ITN issued writs for libel, the case is still awaiting trial. Although the forthcoming case itself has received some coverage, its wider implications for freedom of speech and in explaining the the background to the continuing Balkans unrest have not. Few newspapers, television or radio stations have seriously examined the background to an event, which, as with the Racak massacre, sparked off NATO's use of force in the Balkans.

Instead, both Deichmann and the editors of LM have been systematically branded 'Serb apologists' and compared to the revisionist historians associated with the Holocaust. There has been no outcry at an attempt by a major news organisation to stifle an alternative view of world affairs by an independent magazine. The dominant perspective, and NATO's associated actions, have been endorsed without significant protest or investigation.



The immense damage inflicted on Serbia's infrastructure was rarely conveyed by NATO-friendly media.

MANAGING THE OCCUPATION

The issue of a ground invasion had divided NATO from the outset, its implications for the future of the treaty organisation as well as the future of the wider Balkans region dominating headlines, before, during and after the occupation began.

This show of diplomatic wrangling provided a convincing sideshow to the reality of events on the ground, enticing coverage and analysis away from the brutal manner in which NATO occupation troops evidently dealt with the unexpected level of resistance encountered as they crossed the border.

Unreported, as the first retreating Serbian's were shot by British, American and German troops entering Kosovo, US planes were simultaneously providing 'tactical support' to KLA fighters engaging rogue units of the Serbian police. This 'tactical support' was the usage of cluster bombs against an army with little fire power and no heavy artillery; mostly civilians armed with ageing Russian made rifles. Witnesses on the ground say that US jets repeatedly attacked Serbian police units, many of them preparing to retreat as agreed by Milosevic only days before. Among those killed by the secret air strikes were three young brothers returning from a day working in fields nearby.

Not only did NATO fail to admit that the attacks had been officially sanctioned (implying that the pilots had acted on their own free will, in which case an investigation should be conducted), it denied that the action contradicted official policy. Luckily then that Blair's earlier statement that "NATO will avoid taking sides" had been largely taken as media friendly rhetoric. Few journalists investigated or acknowledged the air strikes as genuine despite eyewitness accounts, those that did failed to question why such an action had gone unaccounted for by NATO considering its already tarnished track record in admitting culpability.

Equally, when the KLA first suggested that it would not lay down its arms in the face of the oncoming NATO occupation troops, it was widely reported that both Clinton and Blair firmly stated that such a stance contradicted the agreement reached at Rambouillet

(false in itself) and would be dealt with accordingly.

What failed to be reported was that many of the weapons in the hands of the KLA had been supplied by the US. There was no mention that the US Government began arming the Kosovo fighters as early as August 1998, hoping, in the words of one senior defence official, "to precipitate an internal solution to the ongoing Kosovan problem."

NATO at first denied this but later admitted that it could not claim for certain that some of the weapons in the hands of the KLA may be of US origin.

DOMESTIC POST-MORTEM

Commentators are already talking of the Kosovo conflict as being 'well managed' by NATO, Blair specifically. Polly Toynbee caused outrage amongst anti war journalists after announcing on BBC Newsnight that "when going to war, one must weigh up whether the good that will come will outweigh the bad - in this case, I think the facts speak for themselves. Kosovo is a just and moral war."

This 'just and moral' war has led to the killing of well over ten thousand Serbian people, many of them civilians. It has smashed the Serbian economy and infrastructure and destroyed the natural environment. It has displaced over a million people and destabilised the entire region, creating a scenario where NATO troops had no choice but to deploy. The media then described this as the 'Liberation' of Kosovo'. Television pictures freely illustrated the ecstatic Kosovo Albanians as NATO troops entered the towns and villages previously occupied by Serb troops. What they failed to show was the significant Serbian anti-NATO demonstrations taking place away alongside the jubilant celebrations.

Equally, there was no mention of the British and French company representatives flooding into Kosovo just behind the troops, preparing to estimate the scale of the rebuilding programme required after any war. There were no television reports examining why it was that some UK firms had already negotiated lucrative construction deals with the Foreign Office even before the first bombs fell on Belgrade.

None of this seemed to worry Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair's press secretary, who forced his way onto the media platform to give a scathing attack on what he saw as a media obsessed with 'tripping up' and 'catching out' NATO command, a media which applied "a moral equivalence between ethnic cleansing and a stray bomb that accidentally killed civilians." Not only was such an attack false in fact (no, or very few journalists had dared question NATO's motives), it was illustrative of the wider media 'postmortem' which took place after the occupation. For all the discussion about whether the media had indeed covered the conflict in an objective manner, most of which kept the subject on a philosophical (ie inaccessible) level, there was virtually no mention of the very issue at hand -

reporting (or exposing as it became) on events which failed to make the news. As one commentator put it, "Campbell was brought in to 'spin' the spin, and in doing so brought the level of discussion down to a margin of seriousness not fit for debate in the serious press."

Equally, should Campbell and most of the other media commentators who commented on the subject really be taken seriously, considering that he (and many of them) represent a country for which dropping bombs is now part of daily business? Even now, whilst engaging in Kosovo, Britain and its chief ally, the US, are bombing Iraq almost daily, with America attempting to up the stakes in the Far East by deploying a mini 'Star Wars' 'Theatre Missile Defence' between Taiwan, Japan and South Korea. This is part of Clinton's plan to 'stabilise' the world through expansionist US foreign policy - 'stabilise' through the expansion of nuclear weapons programmes, the very reason Iraq is being bombed and isolated in the first place.

Clinton talks of 'decent', 'moral' values, Blair of the 'right thing to do'. The US supports the Turkish Government with finance and weapons. A Government with one of the worst records of human rights in the world, a Government engaged in systematic 'ethnic cleansing' against the Kurds - the primary motive for Clinton's war against the Serbs.

The UK repeatedly sells arms to Indonesia, a country whose government has murdered almost half a million East Timorese in the name of occupation. Murdered with the help of British Hawk jets and machine guns. Of the forthcoming referendum on independence for East Timor, Blair talks of 'excellent progress', 'of Britain's commitment to democracy'. Democracy is what he spoke of when the first bombs fell on Belgrade.

Andy Wasley is a journalist and researcher specialising in media issues. Additional reporting by Mollie Brandl-Bowen and Simon Palmer.

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