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**The Role of the Media
in the Planning and Conduct of Strategic
Operations with Reference to the
Gulf War 1991 and the Bosnian War 1992-95**

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INTRODUCTION

“Journalists and policy-makers alike tend to assume that media coverage has an undefined yet pivotal role in helping conflict management or prevention”, writes Nik Gowing¹. The role of the media and its influence on the conduct of contemporary warfare is often ambiguous, even more so today where advanced satellite technologies allow us virtually ‘to be’ in the theatre of operations, as conflicts unfold, through our screens.

During international crises, this sense of proximity may lead to a perceived pressure on governments to act, or to change an initial course of action, by the public’s reaction to wars as reported. To what extent this is valid will prove the main thread of the argument that follows. Two main theories on policy-media relations will be mentioned for the argument’s purpose: the over-quoted CNN Effect or Factor, encapsulated *“by the idea that real-time communications technology could provoke major responses from domestic audiences and political elites to global events”*² and the Manufacturing Consent theory advanced by Chomsky, whereby the media is ‘mobilised’ or ‘manipulated’ into supporting government lines on certain policies and therefore has a limited impact as free agent over policy-making or policy-change³.

Media organisations are increasingly globalised in nature: no longer bound to one particular territory and with the technological opportunities that allow for independent reporting and investigation, as Susan Carruthers argues, *“no war is ‘theirs’ but potentially they may make any conflict*

¹ N. Gowing, 1997, p.1

² P. Robinson, 1999, p.301

³ N. Chomsky, E.Herman, 1994

around the globe 'ours'.⁴ It has thus been claimed that the media play a central role in the constitution of global crises, in selecting which of the many on-going wars around the world at any one time will receive global attention and, with it, a place at the top of the policy-makers agenda.

The media are globalising structurally and financially. When US media critic Ben Bagdikian started tracking media ownership in 1982, there were 50 firms dominating the market. Now there are fewer than ten⁵. The deepest irony of all this is that, as the economy globalises, we actually find out less and less about one another from the media.

Increasing commercial pressure and cost cutting⁶ mean that coverage of international news in the West has dropped by an average of 50% in the last ten years. On a single British channel, ITV, it has dropped by 80% since the onset of satellite competition⁷. In the US Out of 922 minutes of news during the week of 16-21 May 1994 (excluding adverts) only 4 minutes and thirty seconds were devoted to the news in Bosnia and for reporting of the conflict in former Yugoslavia. Out of 740 news items during that week, on five national networks and three local/regional affiliates, only five items were devoted to events in Bosnia⁸.

Since the 1980s global media corporations, with extensive trans-national and cross-media interests, have emerged. News organisations may have institutional interests that could affect the way stories are covered. In the US, for example, NBC (National Broadcast Corporation) belongs to General Electric, one of the nation's defence manufacturers⁹. Competition is rife, and the battle for scoops and ratings has led to the perception that, in some instances, as we shall see, news corporations have supplanted conventional diplomatic and intelligence channels for policy-makers. The alleged upshot is a compression of policy-makers' response-time available during crisis.

In the opinion of a former Chair of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colonel Bill Smullen, the presence of satellite television in a crisis zone will "*be a decisive factor in decision making*" with

⁴ S. Carruthers, 2000, p.198

⁵ K. Ainger, 2001, p.11

⁶ AOL employs 79,000 people with revenues of \$31.8 bn; News Corporation employs 50,820 with revenues of \$13.5bn; Viacom employs 126,820 with revenues of \$12.86bn; Bertelsmann employs 64,800 with revenues of \$16.3bn. (K. Ainger, 2001, pp 18-19).

⁷ K. Ainger, as above

⁸ A. Babbili US Coverage in 'TV News Coverage 16-21 May 1994', in Gow, Paterson and Preston 1996, 177

⁹ M. Gottshalk, 1992, pp.449-486

General Powell going as far as to suggest that “*real-time television could now be a factor in not [emphasis added] going to war*”¹⁰.

This paper will argue, through the analysis of some aspects of the wars in Bosnia and Iraq, that the level of impact that the media can have on foreign-policy and the conduct of warfare can only be judged on circumstantial evidence, primarily on issues such as the nature of the conflict; whether there is a clear policy for action; the aims to be achieved through the involvement in the crisis; public support; the amount of censorship and free-movement on the ground the media is allowed and, last but not least, a strategic component of national interest.

CONCLUSION

The experience of the US (in civil wars) has been unhappy, exemplified by its ignominious retreat from Somalia in 1992 after an unprecedented media circus at the first beach landings by Special Forces some months earlier: “*The eagerness for intervention in civil wars is slowly receding to the same degree that the role of the media in reporting such conflicts is coming under close scrutiny*”¹¹, claims Burns. One could argue that perhaps such statement is slightly exaggerated: there may be a direct, inversely proportional relationship between media scrutiny and the ‘push’ for intervention, but this is not what ultimately leads governments to initiate or change a certain policy path.

The CNN alone is not responsible for the failure of institutions to deal successfully with major conflicts around the world. It could be argued that the institutions are no less successful now than they ever were, it is simply that public expectations have been raised far above the practical realities of implementation and such expectations are not always necessarily compatible with realpolitik.

No president could now go to war without a strategy for managing the news to his advantage and keeping the press from unravelling his policies and successes. According to Cheney, then Secretary of Defence, two broad principles guided the planning: first, military needs should outweigh the media ‘rights’ to cover the war. This meant that ensuring operational security and military convenience would

¹⁰ N. Gowing, 1994, p.15

¹¹ Burns, p.97

be placed above ensuring press access to the battlefield and information. Second, the government must at all costs maintain its credibility with the public, which meant that, in Cheney's words, "...*don't get out there making claims you can't back up*"¹². Or, in Colin Powell's words, "[if a commander] *in Desert Shield sat around in his tent and mused with a few CNN guys and pool guys and other guys, it's in 105 capitals a minute later*"¹³. The preservation of operational security appears of paramount concern here, but it is not the only concern. Political needs were placed above journalists' rights. Public support and opinion, especially in those countries more prominent in the coalition against Iraq, had to be mobilized in the desired direction by conveying a unified message through a media system that was managed so as not to allow journalists running free in the desert and reporting in a patchwork of different styles and contents. National interest seems, in the end, to be a concern which is placed above public opinion's perceptions and power to influence strategies.

Iraq's propaganda attempts backfired almost completely. Instead of turning the American public against the war, if anything they stiffened America's resolve to deal harshly with Saddam Hussein and by default contributed to America's winning the war – a war which the American administration, through the military and the media, claimed pretty much successfully from the beginning was winnable.

As for Bosnia, the public, at least to begin with, did not need to be 'mobilised' into supporting particular policies as they were non-existent. The media, it could be argued, had much more of a pro-active effect in spurring initiatives that were bound to fail as long-term, effective policies but certainly helped to raise international awareness of the Yugoslav conflicts. However, if one goes back at the late 1980s, as this paper has tried to show, the nationalistic tone of Milosevic's gatherings should have warned of the troubles ahead; when they materialised, it was perhaps 'wrong timing'. The disastrous US intervention in Somalia also put a brake on the 'superpower's' williness to intervene in a situation where there is no clear policy to follow, and, perhaps even more importantly, where an exit strategy is missing. The Croat's successful 1995 campaign to retake Serb-held Krajina, in the end, provided the favourable circumstances for intervention; the campaign allowed for a new balance of power to

¹² New York Times 15/5/91

¹³ as above

emerge, which provided with new opportunities for peace and the US quickly took advantage of them, especially as Milosevic did not seem to provide any support or protection to the Krajina Serbs.

Yugoslavia, as mentioned before, did not have any strategic interests for the US after the end of the Cold War; but the processes of dissolution of states following that, in the early 1990s, may have led the US to conclude that: “*Western acquiescence to Yugoslavia’s disintegration into ethnically based states might serve as a precedent for ethnic groups in Russia to raise up against Moscow, risking widespread chaos in a region rich in nuclear weapons*”¹⁴. Intervening in Bosnia saw strategic elements, such this, being taken into consideration in the final instance: issues of national interest and international security seem of paramount are the key issues here. But it seems that only when these are threatened, in a way or another, for the long-term that military intervention, or any fundamental change in international policy during conflict, will take place.

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