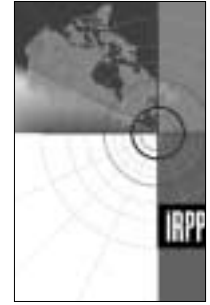


THE MEDIA DIMENSION IN FOREIGN INTERVENTIONS



Morand Fachot

The NATO intervention in Yugoslavia was the first major military campaign of a new era in which the Internet, the satellite and the 24/7 news cycle now requires governments to devise comprehensive communications strategies in order to keep on top of the information game. It became evident during the 78-day campaign that, especially in the democracies, good communications can be as important as effective military forces. Losing the public relations battle can bring outcomes that are almost as devastating to national policy as losing on the battlefield.

L'intervention de l'OTAN en ex-Yougoslavie a été la première campagne militaire majeure de la nouvelle ère : l'ère de l'Internet, du satellite et de l'information continue. Pour rester maîtres du jeu de l'information, les gouvernements sont désormais tenus de mettre au point des stratégies globales de communications. Durant les 78 jours de cette campagne, il est devenu évident que, particulièrement dans les pays démocratiques, la qualité des communications importe autant que l'efficacité des effectifs militaires. Une défaite dans la bataille des relations publiques peut être aussi néfaste, pour la politique intérieure, qu'une défaite sur le champ de bataille.

I don't think you can fight a war today without taking into account the media focus, that's a reality today. So you have to plan how to handle your media strategy, just as you plan your operational strategy for any campaign.

Col P. J. Crawley, spokesman, National Security Council

Il n'y a pas de gestion de guerre sans une gestion de la communication.

Col J.-E. Winckler, Délégation à l'Information et à la Communication de la Défense

Winning the media campaign is just as important as winning the military campaign.... The media is not an optional add-on; it is key.

NATO Spokesman Jamie Shea

With recent major advances in computing and telecommunications making possible both the processing of huge volumes of data and information and their instant global dissemination, the world is experiencing a media revolution. This revolution comes at a time when the international environment has undergone a

radical transformation: The end of the Cold War has brought major changes in the nature of conflicts. The end of the East-West confrontation has not translated into a more stable world, however: Both the frequency and intensity of regional and internal conflicts have intensified everywhere. These conflicts have in turn led liberal democracies to intervene on peacekeeping, peace-enforcement or humanitarian missions—interventions that have been widely covered by the media, and in some cases, many observers say, have even been led by the media.

Because liberal democracies no longer have to deal with Soviet Communism, which had posed a major, unrelenting threat to their long-term vital interests or even survival, and because their former adversaries have become partners or even allies, they find themselves increasingly drawn into external interventions for humanitarian reasons, as part of a coalition or of international efforts under the aegis of the UN or regional organisations. Post-Cold War conflicts are mainly provoked by local leaders and groups trying to exploit local differences for personal gain, their main victims being civilians. The ideological dimension has all but disappeared, though this obviously does not mean that danger is absent. The best examples of this new trend are the wars which have devastated the former Yugoslavia since 1991.

In this new international environment the media have an important and unprecedented influence on international developments.

Information and knowledge have become the major sources of wealth, power and growth. Modern societies are increasingly dependent on computers and the constant flow of information they provide. The military—in the United States in particular—gives information a decisive role in modern warfare: “Information supremacy” is now seen as essential to prevailing both in conflicts and in military operations other than war.

The information revolution and the emergence of digital technology have prompted extraordinary advances in telecommunications. Satellites, with their ability to transmit information instantly and globally, represent the backbone of the electronic media revolution. Over 220 Western-built commercial communications satellites in orbit at the beginning of 2000 carried some 5,000 transponders, half of which were used for broadcasting services.

For its part, digitisation, which allows the compression of large volumes of data (whether text, sound, or pictures, moving or still) and their instantaneous transfer, has made possible the instant exchange of news throughout the world. Digitisation also offers the possibility of carrying up to eight TV channels on each satellite transponder, which means the current fleet could carry well over 10,000 broadcasting services, capacity that has lowered the cost of satellite transmission to the point where political and dissident groups can gain a global reach.

These advances in (relatively!) old technology, together with the advent of the Internet (a completely new medium) as a significant and effective news-delivery system, have brought about a global media environment in which the way news and information are collected, packaged, circulated and accessed throughout the world has been completely transformed. The main characteristics of this new environment are an explosion in the number of broadcasting outlets and the global, real-time exchange of information.

The new global media environment directly affects international relations and the way conflicts are being managed. Most people in developed countries get their news through the electronic media, television in particular. As a result, the public perception of international events is now essentially shaped by television pictures—which carry much greater emotional weight than words but rarely provide all the nec-

essary background needed to develop a properly informed opinion (despite the popular delusion that “pictures, unlike words, don’t lie”). In this picture-driven news environment no pictures (or, more precisely, no video) means no news.

The landscape is also complicated by the ever larger number of players—governments, armed forces, NGOs, lobbying groups and even revolutionary movements—now making use of the various media, including the Internet, to try to influence or even control domestic and/or foreign public opinion at times of crisis. Foreign and security policies, which, more than any other aspects of government, were until fairly recently the exclusive preserve of a limited number of players, have now entered the public domain.

The explosion in the number of broadcasting outlets that is at the heart of the media revolution has resulted in an insatiable need for content, news in particular, and wars and natural disasters represent good content for broadcasters. At the same time, the advent of a truly global media environment has brought about a globalisation— a certain uniformity—in the presentation of news and in the perception of international events.

A number of television channels broadcasting mainly news, whether globally or regionally, now reach a large worldwide audience. The best known is CNN International, which was launched in 1985. CNN’s branded networks and services are now available to more than one billion people in 212 countries and territories. But BBC World TV reaches 167 million homes in nearly 200 countries and territories; Deutsche Welle-tv broadcasts in German, English and Spanish to 105 million households world-wide; and the pan-European image-based channel EuroNews, broadcasts in six European languages to over 95 million households throughout Europe and the Mediterranean Basin. These channels have been joined by a number of round-the-clock national news channels in many countries.

Policy-makers in developed countries have always exploited the media to muster public support for their domestic and foreign policies. The media have long played an important role in shaping public opinion in the international domain, conveying governments’ policies to the public and/or pushing their own agenda. In fact, their power is such that on a number of occasions they have been credited with encouraging foreign interventions or blamed for causing nation-

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Mogadishu example: The US warship carrying invasion troops to Haiti withdrew.

Another example of a successful “CNN effect” (though in this case it was a “BBC or ITN effect”) was “Operation Provide Comfort” launched by the British and US governments to protect and feed Kurdish refugees in northern Iraq following extensive media coverage of their plight by British television channels in March and April of 1991.

If anything, these examples show that the “CNN effect” can, in certain specific cases, influence foreign and security policy decisions, but that this is far from being the case all the time.

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

The Haiti episode illustrates another very significant development: Players in the international arena—even in non-developed countries—are becoming skilful “media warriors”. They are aware of the potential power of the media and use the new technologies to influence public opinion and decision-makers as they wage asymmetric struggles against more advanced countries or foes. In southern Lebanon, for instance, Hezbollah operates its own TV channel—Al-Manar (“Lighthouse”)—which for a number of years has been sending units to the front line to film attacks on Israeli and southern Lebanon militia forces. After quick editing, the insertion of militant background music and multimedia effects, the footage is aired on Lebanese television or on one of Hezbollah’s channels. From there, the pictures reach Israel television, channels in other Arab countries, CNN of course, and still other networks.

Once again, however, the media’s effect can go both ways. The United Nations believes the media are instrumental in helping it secure the military and logistical support it needs from some of its members, as explained in a recent UN internal report “Comprehensive review of peacekeeping operations in all their aspects”. For their part, NGOs also make extensive use of the media to advance their various causes and attract funds from the public or governments.

All contemporary conflicts involve three central players: government, the military and the media. Each needs the other two, though for very

different reasons. As a result, their relationship is not easy and often leads to friction.

Having the responsibility of deciding whether to intervene abroad and possibly commit the country’s forces to combat, governments in liberal democracies use the media to explain and promote their policies and to seek and sustain public support for them. The main difficulties faced by governments in their relationship with the media at times of international crises are mostly connected with the shortened news cycle, and the need to respond to (or make the best use of) the “CNN effect”.

In times of conflict, politicians sometimes tend to behave in a heavy-handed manner with the press, even in the most liberal of democracies, a fact that was highlighted in the 1999 Kosovo conflict when the BBC came under severe criticism from a number of British officials for “negative reporting”.

By definition the priorities of the media and of the military are often at odds. Both military and media have a time-sensitive—but conflicting—approach to information: The military is reluctant to release any information that could jeopardise operational safety. For the press, speed is vital: Old news is no news, especially in today’s real-time global media environment.

As a result, relations between the press and the military can be awkward and stressful. In the US, the tense nature of the relationship was established by the Vietnam war, which made the military fear, quite reasonably, that unrestricted reporting of a war would turn public opinion against it. As Marshall McLuhan noted in 1975: “Television brought the brutality of war into the comfort of the living room. Vietnam was lost in the living rooms of America—not the battlefields of Vietnam.”

At times of crisis, the various military establishments tend to deal differently with the media according to their own experience—and to that of others. The current tendency during conflicts is to try to control the media, to a certain extent at least. One system currently in favour is that of the media pool, in which representative journalists are included in a pool and their reports made available to the rest of the media. Many journalists resent this system, which greatly restricts their access to the battlefield and allows the military to control what the pool reporters can cover. The system makes sense for the military, however, when one considers the ever-growing number of journalists covering conflicts in which Western forces are involved:

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was implemented at both the alliance and national levels.

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

The air campaign posed a major problem for the media, particularly television, as it didn’t offer pictures. In today’s picture-led media environment, no pictures means no news. As a result, the media were left to focus mainly on the alliance’s more egregious blunders, pictures of which the Serbs were only too happy to provide. For instance, NATO’s media efforts suffered a major setback in mid-April when a convoy of refugees was caught in a NATO air strike near Djakovica. Ten to 20 people were killed according to NATO, 75 according to the Serbs. Belgrade exploited the incident fully, taking foreign journalists to the scene of the attack to report, while NATO took five days to come up with an explanation, a delay that seriously dented both its credibility and public support for the air campaign throughout most NATO countries (with the exception of the USA and, to a lesser extent, the UK, as opinion polls clearly indicated). Another instance of “collateral damage”, in which 55 passengers died in an air raid on a train, reinforced the downward trend in public support for the war in several NATO countries. Had such incidents happened at the very beginning of the campaign they would undoubtedly have had a much greater negative impact on Western public opinion.

Following these incidents, British Prime Minister Blair dispatched his press secretary to Brussels, where he spent several days advising NATO on revamping its media operations. These were reinforced with officials sent from the major capitals and, as a result, the news management operation became much more efficient. Jamie Shea later explained NATO’s media strategy: “Part of being convincing is to saturate the airwaves. Our credo at NATO was just to be on the air the whole time, crowd out the opposition, give every interview, do every briefing...”

A number of lessons can be drawn from recent experiences:

- The global media environment that has emerged from the information and media revolutions has had a significant impact on the international environment by shaping public opinion much more extensively and quickly than in the past, and by shortening the news cycle, thus forcing decision makers to react much more quickly.

- The so-called “CNN effect” has had some impact on the conduct of foreign policy, but is not as far-reaching as many claim.

- Public opinion is more fickle than ever and must be the target of a comprehensive information effort to allow policy-makers and the military to achieve even short-term objectives.

- An ever greater array of players on the international scene—governments, lobby groups, terrorist organisations, and others—are becoming skilful “media warriors” and will use the media as an equaliser in their struggle with economically and militarily more powerful adversaries.

- Decision-makers and the military alike must integrate a media strategy into their overall strategy in foreign interventions—be they minor or major, of a military or civilian nature, driven by reasons of national interest or, as is increasingly the case, by humanitarian considerations.

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

In view of the growing media dimension of recent military interventions the post-Vietnam hostile approach to the media on the part of the military, described in 1990 by retired USMC Lieutenant-General and journalist Bernard E. Trainor as: “duty, honor, country and hate the media,” is bound to change to a more positive “think media—win the war”.

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