

## **The Media: virtual wars and virtual lies**

**By Siddhartha**

It was in Geneva that the full significance of the movie 'Wag the dog' hit me. I was in the city to attend the North South Media Festival, an annual event organised by the Swiss Media (Television Suisse Romande) in collaboration with the University Institute of Development Studies (IUED). Pink magnolias were in bloom everywhere but I had regretfully little time to take in the flowery eruptions that signaled the beginning of spring. The ten days I spent in the city turned out to be a worrying personal reflection, a lament, on the ways the media is manipulated, particularly in times of war. In large measure this reflection was precipitated by the discussions I had with the Belgian journalist, Michel Collon, who had just published a book on the lies and fabrications used to justify the Kosovo war, a war which Nato and the Americans termed as 'humanitarian'.

But let me begin with 'Wag the Dog', a movie that has cleverly exposed the perverse role of media agencies in deceiving the public to boost the faltering re-election campaign of a US president. Directed by Barry Levinson, the two main characters are played by Robert De Niro and Dustin Hoffman. De Niro plays the hatchet man employed by a worried president who faces an election in two weeks. The president is under siege, for what is hogging the limelight are not his achievements but the explosive charge of sexual harassment that a young woman has brought against him. De Niro decides that a diversion is needed if the President is to win the election. He announces he is going to stage a phoney war. "War is show business," he says, "the American people will buy it."

A White House aide suggests that such a war would not be true. "What the hell does it matter if it is true." De Niro retorts. What is important is that there is "an appearance of a war" to distract from the sexual misconduct scandal and rally support behind the President.

"But they would find out," worries the anxious aide.  
"Who's going to tell them?" is De Niro's sly response.

De Niro decides to 'create' a war in Albania. A story is planted that Albanian terrorists are about to smuggle a suitcase bomb into America. This presents the perfect alibi to start a fictive war against Albania. The American public would believe the war was real and support their president in this time of crisis. Dustin Hoffman plays a producer who films a distraught and screaming young Albanian peasant woman, apparently running through the ruins of her village, escaping a massacre. Hoffman wants her to be seen running with a kitten in her hands. There is some difficulty in finding a kitten, so an assistant suggests a dog or a cat. But Hoffman insists on a kitten. Only a kitten will add the necessary poignancy. Just then the President himself calls to say that he wants a white kitten. Not any kitten, but a white kitten. The technicians find a white kitten in their data bank and place it electronically into the arms of the girl. The concocted scene is beamed on the TV

channels shortly afterward. It has the desired result and Americans are shocked. A quick 'war' follows (again fictive, but who is to tell the good citizens?) to teach the Albanians a lesson. Meanwhile the opinion ratings of the President climb sharply and he is sure to be reelected.

The Wag-the-Dog thesis may come across as totally implausible scenario, merely the stuff of movies. But compare what the movie fictionally portrays with the following story told me by Michel Collon, the Belgian journalist. During the Gulf war, Amnesty International published a report which stated that 300 premature babies in a Kuwaiti hospital had died when Iraqi soldiers removed their incubators. The report, released in August 1990, went on to say that a doctor belonging to the Kuwaiti Red Cross, who wished to remain anonymous, affirmed that 312 babies had died at the Al Sabbah hospital after their incubators had been removed by the Iraqi soldiers. He himself had buried 72 babies in the cemetery of Al Rigga. Amnesty also mentioned a young Kuwaiti nurse, who saw armed Iraqi soldiers entering a room where 15 babies lay in their incubators. The young nurse was quoted as saying, " They removed the babies from the incubators and left them to die on the floor. It was horrible."

The then US president, George Bush was reported by Time magazine (31 December, 1990) to have urged the public to read the report. Bush said that the report had convinced him that sanctions against Iraq were unlikely to yield results and that it was necessary to go to war. In one single month Bush made six references to the babies removed from the incubators. In the United States the report was used to silence those who did not want war with Iraq. Seven Congressmen decided to support the war on the basis of the report. Although the media splashed the report all over the world it was contradicted by other doctors in the same hospital and strongly doubted by Middle East Watch, a pro-western human rights organisation.

Three months later Amnesty International admitted that the story was false. Guy Angel, the chief doctor of the French military, confirmed it was untrue after the liberation of Kuwait. A year later came the astonishing revelation that the young nurse, whose testimony had so powerfully affected public opinion, was in fact the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to Washington and that the whole affair had been fabricated by a US public relations firm, Hill and Knowlton. ( Michel Collon told me that Hill and Knowlton had built up a reputation for fabricating high quality images that were used to prop up dictators around the world.)

Even if they will not admit it, war correspondents are not always objective in their reporting- assuming that there is such a thing as being objective. They are often either for something or against something, and in a few cases, they manage to temper their biases to get the story as it happened. Was Michel Collon objective? He probably was, to the extent he can be. I have since corroborated some of the things he told me. Besides, the organisers of the prestigious media festival, where he and I were speakers, had invited him because they believed that his version of the war did merit to be heard, that what the international media had generally projected might not represent the whole truth.

Although Collon had the looks of a rugged movie actor, he was an unrelenting writer on political affairs, with not the slightest penchant for histrionics. He had decided early that his life would be on the margins, a voice that might not be powerful, but one which could not be easily overlooked. He knew where he stood on most issues, insofar as anybody knows anything in these complex times. But years of being on the margin had also turned him into a combatant, a role he seemed to relish. We stayed at the Hotel Astoria, on rue de Cornavin, and each morning we met for breakfast. He helped himself to cereal and I went for the croissants. We talked as we ate, he eating his cereal as a necessity and I devouring my croissants after dipping them into my cup of tea. It was not the proper way to eat croissants in Geneva. Only children did the sort of thing, dipping their croissants in milk and dropping crumbs on the linen. But I have never had pretensions to being a proper person, and as long as I paid my bills, the hotel did not seem to mind.

Collon advanced several reasons why the United States was determined to wage war in Kosovo. According to him the two main factors were Yugoslavia's refusal to enter Nato (the only country in the region which refused) and the disinclination to allow multinational companies easy access into the country. Another of Collon's reasons was the desire of the United States to assert military supremacy over Europe, rubbing it in that they were the only superpower going. (Nato was the organ through which Europe could be militarily controlled and a war against Yugoslavia would further strengthen the American hold. Several European leaders had also joined issue against Yugoslavia, but they would have preferred other methods to outright war.) The US also wanted to humiliate Russia by defeating Yugoslavia, a Russian ally. From an economic standpoint the Danube was an important waterway for the transportation of oil and gas, and Yugoslavia could not be allowed to be recalcitrant. American companies were also eagerly waiting to move into the country in the impending post-Milosevic era.

Philip Knightly wrote in the Guardian Weekly that the US State department and the Pentagon let it be known that 500,000 Albanians had been massacred by the Serbs. This was before the war began. During the war the figure was brought down to 100,000, and after the war they reduced it dramatically to 10,000, probably realising that they would have difficulties in showing a reasonable number of mass graves. Nato also lied when it said that it did not attack civilian targets. The US had realised that one of the main reasons they lost the Vietnam war was its inability to control the media. Knightly writes that the new manuals of the Pentagon and the British Ministry of Defence state that they should 'appear transparent and eager to help; never go in for summary repression or direct control; nullify rather than control undesirable news; control emphasis rather than facts; balance bad news with good; and lie directly only when certain the lie will not be found out during the course of the war.' After Vietnam, the military establishments of the more powerful countries had learned their lessons.

In a recently published book, "The New Military Humanism", The American social critic, Noam Chomsky, states that a specious new logic is being propounded that justifies war if 'enlightened states' believe it to be just. To show how casually this doctrine is held he quotes California Law Professor Michael Glenn on who writes in the influential journal, Foreign Affairs (May/June, 1999): "The crisis in Kosovo illustrates... America's new

willingness to do what it thinks is right - international law notwithstanding." One might add that this holier-than-thou attitude is even more shocking because, in the case of Kosovo, it did not even receive the sanction of the legislatures of the Nato member countries who went to war, leave alone the approval of the United Nations.

General Wesley K. Clark, the US-Nato commander, stated on September 16<sup>th</sup>, 1999, "This was not, strictly speaking, a war." It was a virtual war for the Nato countries. A spectacle to be watched on TV screens for viewers all over the world. Nato did not suffer a single casualty, although 2000 Yugoslavs were killed, 5000 wounded and 2000 handicapped for life. Michael Ignatieff, a war correspondent, writes that in the Kosovo conflict death was removed from the experience of war, at least for Nato. Technological mastery had made this possible. But the danger was, that war without death ceased to be fully real. It became a virtual war, not real anymore in the consciousness of millions of people. The consequences were therefore also less real. In his book 'Virtual War', Ignatieff, who was on the side of Nato, raises some morally difficult issues. "What was new about the Kosovo war," he writes, "is the impunity with which it was waged. But if impunity is required before values are defended, what exactly are values worth?...If Western nations can employ violence with impunity, will they not be tempted to use it more often?" Ignatieff ducks his own question by answering that the future depends not only on the West, but also on its enemies.

Truth is a casualty in modern warfare, insists Ignatieff. Both sides to the conflict realise the importance of public opinion and try to influence the media, often feeding it with disinformation and specious arguments. The bombing of the TV station in Belgrade is an example. Nato bombed the television station when 15 people, including a young female make-up artist, were present in the building. British lawyers had argued against the strike stating that the Geneva conventions prohibited the use of force against journalists and television stations, but the American side had insisted that the station was used both to broadcast 'hate speech' and send military signals to the Yugoslav troops. When it was certain that the TV station was an imminent target why were 15 people present in the building when the Nato Stealth bomber struck? Perhaps because Milosevic felt that the death of the journalists and television personnel would be another occasion to create doubts in the minds of the Western public and force Nato to end the war. In virtual war every effort is made to lump truth and falsehood together and make unsuspecting citizens gobble it all up via the media. Ignatieff proposes that a good citizen is one who is highly suspicious of what is put on his platter by the media. Taking that cue it's my turn to cast my 'suspicious' gaze on the two journalists, Collon and Ignatieff, I have cited here. I must admit that both are found wanting. While Michel Collon is not sufficiently critical of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic's designs, Ignatieff's work suffers from an insufficient understanding of the hegemonic designs of Nato and the United States. In the end even serious journalists are not entirely free from the fog of ideology and propaganda. Or perhaps they seek refuge in the fog.

In Geneva I also met Jean Zeigler, professor of sociology at the university, on a chill April morning. I was late for my appointment and I decided to overlook the expense and take a taxi. But Zeigler was a good half-hour late and I realised I could as well have

taken a bus. He apologised profusely for being late and made up by being extremely courteous and informative for the next couple of hours. He was in his early sixties and, as he spoke, I discovered that behind the bonhomie lay a razor keen mind. Zeigler was the enfant terrible of the Swiss establishment, gaining his notoriety from his remorseless study of the misdeeds of the Swiss banks. He told me that the vigour of the Swiss economy lay in its devious banking laws and its disreputable numbered accounts. Dictators, drug barons, criminals and tax evaders found the vaults of Swiss banks a haven to stash their money. Zeigler told me that there were seven court cases against him for his exposure of the activities of the banks. But he was also receiving important support from the Europeans who were tightening fiscal laws and who wanted to prevent tax evaders putting their money into Swiss banks.

I carried with me a copy of Michel Collon's book, 'Monopoly', which Michel wanted me to give Zeigler. When I raised Collon's thesis that the reporting on the Kosovo War was duplicitous, Zeigler agreed. He believed that the American influence in Europe was so strong that it created a new apartheid. In Switzerland the financial power of the media empires was such that they could easily manipulate public opinion. The new information technology, which permitted news to be flashed around the world at lightening speed, also allowed stories to be absorbed without the time to verify. In many cases it would actually take as little as a few extra days to verify for lapses, but by then the public would have lost interest or passed on to fresh stories offered by the media. In Geneva there were about 52 main TV channels. Of these, 41 belonged to three companies: Murdoch, RTL and Bertesmann. They had the monopoly of information on Kosovo. Their journalists had no direct access to events in Kosovo. They got their information from the daily press briefings conducted by the disarming and debonair Jamie Shea, whose baby face and deceptively sincere manner was enough to convince a large part of the world of the humanitarian objectives of Nato's war. " Once public opinion is fixed the public are alienated from any other way of looking at the problem." said Zeigler. "Even respected editors of newspapers interiorise all this and turn a deaf ear to other viewpoints."

In the end are we fated to be permanently suspicious of the media? It certainly takes the joy out of life if we have to be suspicious first thing in the morning when we read our papers over a cup of tea. Earlier we might have used the word 'critical'. I myself would prefer the word 'alert' to the more ominous 'suspicious'. But the price for continuous vigilance is never too high for the small chance of reinventing the world into a more civilized and trustworthy place.

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