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THE KOSOVO CONFLICT, MEDIA AND COMPASSION

A Study of Media Reporting, Propaganda and the Public's Reactions in Norway and Sweden

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SUMMARY

The project reported in this volume involved studies of the media coverage of the Kosovo conflict in three countries: Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom, journalists' strategies in covering it, and reactions and comments from audiences in Norway and Sweden. Theoretically the project has applied an integrated globalisation and propaganda perspective where 'discursive order' is the central concept, and in terms of method discourse analysis has been used. Co-operation between the media studies departments at the Oslo and Örebro universities and the journalism school in Oslo has made this research project possible and manageable. This final report is written jointly by Stig A. Nohrstedt, main editor of the book as well as author of chapter 1, 2, 5 and 8, Birgitta Höjjer, author of chapter 7, and Rune Ottosen, author of chapter 3, 4 and 6.

The results of our analysis can be summarised as follows:

1. Media discourses in Sweden and Norway were equally occupied by the fate of the civilian population and their suffering due both

to terror on the ground and to the NATO air attacks. Some minor deviations with respect to emphasis and tone can be noticed, but by and large it seems that the Kosovo media war was quite different from the Persian Gulf media war 1990–91. In the last European war of the last decade, obviously the global discourse of compassion has had more impact on the media discourses than in the first war of the same decade. When comparing these two conflicts, this can partly be explained as reduced influence on the media from the dominant war propaganda discourses. In the Kosovo War journalists from the Western media had more access to unofficial sources on both sides than in the Persian Gulf War.

The audience answered the emotional engagement offered by the media by focusing on civilian victims in two ways: either by responses of compassion or by indifference turning their backs to the suffering. Compassion responses were more pronounced among the female audience and in the beginning of the war. Over time responses of compassion fatigue increased.

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2. However, the NATO propaganda in the Kosovo War was in general quite successful all through the conflict in spinning the media in key strategic terms. The media never seriously questioned the enemy Milosevic as the only one responsible for the war, and NATO's self-proclaimed motives. Not even after the cease-fire, when continuous ethnic cleansing – but now against the Kosovo Serbs – were reported, did the media in general reflect much upon the NATO strategy and its basic objectives, and certainly not its possible hidden agenda. In some letters to the editor and debate items the NATO propaganda was criticised, but this critique did not have any noticeable framing effects on the news, neither could it shake the steady supportive attitude towards NATO in the editorials. But again, on a detailed level some national variations are visible (see below). The way in which the Rambouillet negotiations were staged by the big powers is probably the main explanation to this stable impact on the media from the propaganda discourse (and we might add: as propaganda of deed this is not solely a discursive event).

The NATO propaganda was partly accepted and partly rejected by the audience. The Norwegian audience was more willing to accept it than the audience in the non-member country Sweden. Concerning the enemy picture of Milosevic, however, total consensus prevailed not only in the media coverage but also among the audience groups. No one questioned this.

3. In other respects the Norwegian and Swedish media discourses differed. In particular, the NATO bombing operations were initially given remarkably opposite coverage, but later the two media discourses converged towards a rather critical image. From the start the media in Norway, the NATO country in

this comparison, had a low profile with respect to the effects of the air strikes, but they were generally described as necessary in order to restore peace in Kosovo. The Swedish media on the contrary had a much more outspoken and critical voice, emphasising the potential risks of the conflict spreading out over the entire Balkans and eventually into a third world war. Under the impact of subsequent events, and especially the misdirected attacks on Albanian refugees, the media news discourses in both countries turned into a mainly critical image of the NATO bombings. In this case, the explanation we would suggest is that the combined effect of journalists' access to civilians' experiences on both sides in addition to the impact of the compassion discourse led to increased counter-pressure on the attempts of NATO to dominate the media discourses. The Norwegian media were even more sensitive to this and also more movable because of its initially less critical view than the Swedish.

Some form of ambivalence regarding the NATO bombings was also quite common among the audience, probably due to the fact that over time different voices were heard in the media.

4. Other themes, more closely related to the cold war conflict pattern, like the Russian role in the conflict, show a more rigid discursive pattern. Here the national differences between the media discourses seem to remain also to the end of the conflict, for example when Russian troops suddenly moved into Kosovo from Bosnia. In Norwegian media fear and scepticism dominated, while in Swedish media the image of the Russian troops was part of the enthusiasm and relief, which dominated the coverage. This is a clear indication of the continuous importance of the national security and

foreign policy tradition as a national context for the media discourses.

5. In the analyses special attention have been given to the tabloid discourses as a particular case of inter-discursive relations. These newspapers show distinctively more dynamic patterns than the prestige papers. The latter have closer connections to the diplomatic discourse of the conflict, thus reporting more extensively about peace proposals, negotiations, etc., and also expressing views and perspectives more in accordance with their own government's than the tabloids. This could explain their relatively higher discursive stability compared to the tabloids. We have pointed to the remarkable images in the tabloids *Aftonbladet* and in *Dagbladet* at the end of the war. In both cases heavy impact from the compassion discourse can be an important part of the explanation. Concerning the Swedish tabloid, the way it covered the Russian march into Kosovo – as peace itself entering the scene, met by the people's celebrations and cheers – can be explained, we suggest, by its great attention to civilians' sufferings and sacrifices during the war. No matter what troops came in after the cease-fire, they represented the end of the war and the end of pain. Due to the paper's great concern with the "real face of the war" – it had started its own refugees aid campaign – and without any worries about the Russian intentions, *Aftonbladet* let the euphoric feeling of relief and the pure hope of lasting peace frame its coverage. The Norwegian *Dagbladet* came with strong critique against NATO and the way the Rambouillet negotiations were managed – in fact stronger than in any other of the studied media – after the war. It had over time and due to its special columnist in Belgrade reported quite critically about the human and material costs on the Serbian side, but now the

paper came out with a critique that indicated that the paper and its sources eventually felt free to speak out about their doubts and worries. Mounting compassion for the people on both sides had at last a free way, when loyalty to the government's need to support the NATO policy had played out its role.

6. In conclusion the global discursive order in relation to the Kosovo War seems to imply that the new world order after 1989 has not led to a total US or NATO dominance. It is reasonable to assume that the US hegemonic position as the only superpower is stronger today than before the Persian Gulf War 1990–91, and that this is part of the explanation why the Swedish media discourse in some respect approaches the Norwegian one, for example with respect to the lack of a serious discussion after the war about NATO's responsibility for the war itself and the continuous problems in the neighbouring countries around Kosovo. But this position is nevertheless contested, although not at all in the same way as under the cold war, by an opponent representing an alternative social system. The global discursive order of today tends to be rather open for non-ideological and anti-propaganda discourses, which calls for multi-level discursive analyses.

The global compassion discourse has probably strengthened its relative importance over the media discourses in comparison to the political-ideologically based propaganda discourse, promoted by the USA and NATO for example in the Kosovo War. It goes both ways. Either the propaganda discourse and the compassion discourse push and pull in the same direction, as during the first weeks of the Kosovo War; or the two discourses may conflict and influence the media in opposite directions, as in the second half of the war after the human costs of the air strikes had

taken the paramount place on the news agenda. Hence, it is today more difficult to predict where the sympathy from the general public will land in a military conflict than during the cold war period. This will probably encourage increased concern from spin doctors and propaganda strategist in their ambitions to control the way pity flows. But the positive

thing about this new world order is that it gives civil society more space for anti-ideological and anti-propaganda discourses. And hopefully propaganda based on compassion will be contested and requested to fulfil its claims, or otherwise it will meet with a credibility crisis.

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KOSOVOKONFLIKTEN, MEDIERNA OCH MEDLIDANDET

Skriften redovisar resultaten från ett flerårigt forskningsprojekt om hur Kosovokonflikten 1999 rapporterades i medierna, hur journalister hanterade sitt uppdrag och hur grupper i allmänheten i Norge, Storbritannien och Sverige reagerade på medierapporteringen. Krigspropagandans påverkan av nyheter och debatt som ett centralt inslag i de "nya krigen" påvisas och diskuteras. Men rapporten visar också att en medlidandedimension har blivit alltmer framträdande i krigsjournalistiken under senare år och att fokuseringen på civila offer och det mänskliga lidandet blivit en strategi som journalister använder sig av för att värna sin integritet. De humanitära frågorna är också det som starkast engagerar publiken både i Norge och Sverige, samtidigt som intervjupersonerna i undersökningen uttrycker tydlig kritik mot mediernas bild av konflikten. Men resultaten i rapporten visar även att såväl medierapportering som allmänhetens reaktioner är beroende av den politiska och historiska situationen i olika länder. Ur ett globaliseringsperspektiv betyder det att journalistiken visserligen konvergerar transnationellt, men att skillnaderna mellan olika nationella perspektiv fortfarande är betydande.

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