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Star Wars

Conflict and Media in the Satellite Age

Many of us find it hard to remember, or believe, the euphoria we felt when the Cold War officially came to a close. How we watched, live on television, the breathtaking acceleration of history as a superpower shattered into little pieces. Nearly ten years later, we know history did not end then. Fair play and justice did not suddenly make their way back into international relations. The Cold War may have ended, but Third World wars remained as virulent as ever. Proxy conflicts degenerated into tribal strife as guerrillas abandoned by their superpower mentors were left with enough weapons to keep on fighting for decades. But the international media had moved on to other stories.

Today, looking back at 1989 we have to wonder whether the reason for that euphoria was the over-eager coverage of the dramatic events in Europe by a globalised media, and whether this did not raise our expectations too high. During the Cold War, the international media had an easy job labelling saints and villains. This "black-or-white" coverage usually reflected the main preoccupations of the superpowers and there was no time to explain events in developing countries in proper context.

The needs and suffering of the poorer two-thirds of the world were important only if they were somehow related to the strategic interests of powerful countries and companies. So Dan Rather would don his flakjacket and actually travel to Kabul to do a stand-up. Now that the Cold War bad guys are good guys, the international media are confused. As wars simmer on in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Cambodia or Angola they have given up trying to figure it all out.

Once in a while, a really important strategic story like the Kuwait-Iraq War in 1992 does break out. And then you have the same awesome coverage that treats the deployment of U.S. aircraft carriers and British Tornado squadrons as if it was the World Cup. Television coverage glamourises modern wars by treating them like a video game: smart bombs that never miss the crosshairs, ruggedly handsome pilots with prominent jaws look like characters out of Mortal Kombat. I once sat at Hong Kong airport watching U.S. marines live on television as they waded ashore under the full glare of camera spotlights which were on the beach to greet them. Lights, camera, action: let’s have a war.

In South Asia, Afghanistan offers one of the most dramatic examples of post-Cold War media neglect. As long as the U.S.-backed mujahedeen were valiantly defending the Free world by shooting Soviet helicopter gunships out of the sky, the war got saturation coverage. By the time the Red Army pulled out, the Soviet Union disintegrated, the mujahedeen started slaughtering each other and Kabul was bombed to rubble, the media had moved on–to Chechenia and Bosnia.

But even though the stories are about a different geographical area, the moral double standards of Cold War coverage continues today. The Kuwait-Iraq War showed how media-wise armies can manipulate images and use the competition for dramatic visuals among ratings-driven networks to their best advantage. The result: sanitised coverage of a far-away war that will not spoil the family dinner.

Today, the enemy is not Communism, but Islam. And in many cases, as in Afghanistan, they are the same Muslim groups who fought communism! The West is rattled because of the Stinger missiles. There is no shortage of conservative academics making apocalyptic predictions of future civilisational conflicts to a pliant media. Sweeping simplification and stereotyping have become the norm, and the danger is that it is all going to turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. This has introduced a military dimension to the perceived threat of Islamic fundamentalism and magnified it into a monolithic enemy–a *Time* magazine cover two years ago showed a minaret silhouetted against a setting sun with a hand brandishing a kalashnikov. The strapline in big green letters read: "Islamic Fundamentalism, Should We Be Afraid?" Every time CNN reports on Islamic fundamentalists, the visuals show Muslims bowing in prayer at a mosque, making the dangerous mistake of equating a religion with a militant fringe. That is why the U.S. media, chasing this self-magnified threat of Islamic fundamentalism, failed to notice the rise of White-American fundamentalism in their own back yard.

The lessons for the media are clear: their role should be not just to react to events but to cover the precursors to conflict. After the cruise missiles are unsheathed and the heavy guns are deployed, the momentum of war muzzles media. And as Bosnia showed, not even the saddest stories of human misery and the sufferings of the innocent in the heart of Europe are enough to stop war once it ignites. And once it has begun, it seems wars must run their tragic course and then the media can do nothing but chronicle the carnage. Satellite television has brought us a new voyeuristic dimension to war reporting. The global networks pride themselves on being there first to carry death live. But what good is this coverage if the carnage has already begun? Media can help by being part of the solution rather than part of the problem, by conditioning the public not to think that conflict is the norm.

For this to happen, firstly there must, there has to be a paradigm shift in journalism itself so that reporters bring a moral dimension to everyday work, what Martin Bell calls "the journalism of attachment".Secondly, and more importantly, new worldwide standards are needed to control the excesses of commercialised media, especially global television, which has become little more than the propaganda arm of multinational corporations.

Around the world, there is now new analysis of media and conflict. This is tricky territory: telling journalists to be for peace–because journalists are taught that they are not supposed to be for or against anything. New journalism, therefore, must take the leap to challenge the sacred media doctrine of narrative neutrality. You cannot be neutral about war, just as you cannot be neutral about racism. Narrative neutrality in the media has been elevated to a journalistic credo, neutering reporters and making them incapable of distinguishing right from wrong. It turns journalists into stenographers, responsible only for shovelling facts with no power of analysis and comprehension. Objectivity then just becomes an excuse never to make up one's mind about anything.

If the scale is already tilted in favour of the powerful, objectivity favours those who are already powerful. The danger with narrative neutrality is that it inevitably favours the institutions that control society. Being an objective observer undermines the reporter's ability to place responsibility for the failures of society on those who control society and expose them to manipulation by the elite groups that control media. Veteran writer Martha Gelhorn, who died this year having started out as one of the first female war correspondents, didn't think much of the notion of objectivity. She used to say that the point was "to tell what you saw, contradict the lies and let the bad guys have it".

As one veteran journalism trainer put it, "Forget objectivity, just be fair." Responsible journalism of attachment does not give reporters the license to air their prejudices or to campaign for a cause. The universal values of fairness, accuracy, relevance still hold true; it just tries to make journalists care, especially about human suffering, and not be aloof in the face of blatant injustice.

Traditional journalism schools also tell you to look for the negative to make the story interesting–to look for the controversy. That is why most reportage sounds like a quarrel, even when the point of disagreement may be minor and the two sides are in overall agreement. Conflict is the adrenaline of the media. Because of the way they are trained to look for disagreements, reporters find wars irresistible. And that is also why peace is not news. But for the professional journalist, the period before war should be as newsworthy as the breakout of hostilities itself. In fact, a time of relative peace when social tensions brew can warn of impending crisis. As media critic Johann Galtung puts it: "Peace is not merely the absence of war, or absence of the threat of war. War looks more real and exciting, evil, yes, but intended for the strong and active–mainly men. In this way media may become a negative factor, contributing to worldwide insecurity rather than the opposite, slanting public opinion, training people to see violence as normal, even teaching them techniques."

The rapid commercialisation of global broadcasting and the erosion of the public service role of media play a part in creating the background conditions for social tension by undermining culture and promoting consumerism. Satellite television replaces reality, and whatever falls beyond the penumbra of the home screen does not exist. When you can switch from *Natural Born Killers* on HBO to genocide in Rwanda at the flick of a remote, where does escapsim end and voyuerism begin? And the blue aura of the cathode rays has hypnotised the world into a consumerist, free market trance. And even if channel-surfing viewers can find a news bulletin amidst all the background radiation of talk shows, mini-series, and then stay tuned long enough, they find the news itself is more and more surreal. News and entertainment are merging so it is growing more and more difficult to tell the difference between the courtroom drama of a real-life celebrity murder case and the court-room drama of *LA Law*.

As part of a survey of the effect of satellite television in South Asia, a few of us polled 11-15 year-old boys and girls from upper middle-class families in a school in Kathmandu. Their favourite programmes were MTV and the Sports Channel. Very few ever watched Nepal Television or India’s Doordarshan, no one listened to shortwave radio; the only radio they tuned to was a western hits channel. The students were asked who they admired the most among people they saw on television, and predictably there were many votes for Leonardo DiCaprio. Apart from one vote each for a Sri Lankan president and an Indian cricketer, most role models were Western men and women.

By their own admission, what young Asian urbanites think, the way they dress, what they eat, how they talk, what they want to be when they grow up is largely shaped by what they watch on satellite television. South Asia, with one-fifth of the world’s population, is under the footprint of at least 50 satellite broadcast channels and the figure will double by 2000. The latest estimate is that in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan alone there are more than 70 million households with television, giving a viewership of 300 million. One third of them are hooked to cable, by the year 2007 there will be 220 million cable viewers who will be able to watch the expected 350 channels that will available by then.

Despite South Asia’s poverty, and probably because it provides escapist entertainment, satellite television is big business in the Subcontinent, changing sleeping habits (Delhi

housewives have given up their afternoon naps to watch *The Bold and the Beautiful*), selling skin-whiteners and making even the remotest village a part of the global village.

Advances in communication technology are supposed to shrink distances, but they don't necessarily bring peoples together. Better communications through satellite may give people a wider choice of programming, but it does not guarantee that they become more tolerant. In fact, better communications may actually highlight the differences between peoples. People living in the border regions of India near Pakistan can tune into Pakistani television, but what they see on it is so virulently anti-Indian that it deepens hatreds–and vice versa. And when these prejudices about the "others" has been nurtured from childhood through textbooks that portray the neighbouring country as an enemy, then crossborder television just re-enforces ill feelings.

Satellite television, because of its regionalism, has done slightly better because it has audiences (and markets) in both countries, but even here the markets call the shots. Regional television news does not seem to be able to give proportionate coverage to an item about a python escaping from a zoo in Tokyo and to the dangerous tensions created by the nuclear tests. The enormous potential of satellite television to fan the flames of hatred has already been seen by the speed with which religious riots spread across India and Pakistan after the destruction of a mosque at Ayodhya in 1992. Now that both countries are armed with nuclear weapons and are developing the missile delivery systems, satellite media have enormous responsibility in preventing tensions from getting out of hand.

But the newsrooms, studios and uplinking facilities of many satellite channels are in Hong Kong or Singapore. The people who control these multinational broadcasters are theoretically responsible to no one but their shareholders.

Fewer and fewer people today control the the information and entertainment we get,and they are setting the agenda–how we should behave, what we should buy, which credit cards to use, what movies to watch. They tell us Saddam Hussein is a crook, free trade is good, it is OK for five per cent of the world's population to consume half the world´s resources. When concentration of media ownership dismantles the media's role as a marketplace of ideas and of diversity of viewpoints, the media's role as one of the pillars of pluralism is eroded. On a global scale, they make a mainstream global economic mantra the only one that has any relevance.

And although press may be free, it suffers from "censorship by exclusion". When media conglomerates are controlled by multinational companies that also own tobacco interests, manufacturers of nuclear power stations, or are big defence contractors, you can be sure that investigative reports on the international arms trade or on the targetting of Asian countries by U.S.-based cigarette multinationals will not be very prominent. This concentration of media ownership is not just happening in the United States. The new sultans of satellite are expanding their empires in India, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines. All are owned by national versions of the Murdochs and Maxwells and ape western trends towards corporate-media tie-ups and copying content. As someone said about the globalised media, "It is the state versus the United States."

When broadcasting becomes an entertainment industry with little public service role to inform and educate, it not only spreads the worst consumerist effects of globalisation, but it also undermines the power of media to create an informed public that can take a considered stance on issues–especially issues like nuclear stockpiling by a country where half the population

goes to bed hungry every night. This kind of media fails to be a bulwark against jingoism and false patriotism.

And in the long term, these ownership patterns increase the economic gap within and between countries. Television propagates a global consumer culture that is wasteful, unjust and environmentally unsound. And when this culture is put forward as the only one to aspire for, it perpetuates economic disparities and unsustainable lifestyles. It also leaves more and more people out of the loop, encouraging extremism and provoking a backlash against an uncaring elite and a soulless global "culture". So why are we surprised at the growth of religious extremism and the problem of illegal migrants? The message an average Bangladeshi gets on satellite television every night is that Europe is a land of milk and honey.