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# SECURITY CHALLENGES OF MODERN SOCIETY

Dilemmas and implications

Thematic International Monograph

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Prof. dr Dejan Dašić

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# **SECURITY CHALLENGES OF MODERN SOCIETY**

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Thematic International Monograph

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## MEDIA AS AN INSTRUMENT OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN ARMED CONFLICTS

Miroslav Mitrović<sup>1</sup>, Nenad Perić<sup>2</sup>

**Key Words:**  
strategic  
communication,  
media,  
public opinion,  
gatekeepers

**Abstract:** This paper discusses strategic communication in conflicts, through correlations between politics and the media, and on the basis of the activities of strategic communicators. The relations between the media, politics, foreign policy, bearers of strategic communication in the context of armed conflict, more precisely armed interventions, are examined. Strategic communicators have been identified in the conflicts: political entities, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, social movements, army, and terrorist organizations. Previous studies have shown that even though the impact depends on the phase of the conflict and its duration, the action's most substantial effect is between political structures and military entities. Through the analysis of media content, topics and narratives that were broadcast during the NATO aggression on the FRY in 1999, an analysis of the connections of strategic communicators, the achieved effects and their impact on achieving the goals of the intervention was performed. Special attention was dedicated to the contents of the report and missing topics, in the function of creating public opinion in support of aggression. The conclusion is that administration of USA and NATO had the most substantial influence on the control of information in the "politics-media-politics" cycle.

### Introduction

**T**he relationship between communication and power is a topic that has been present in the works of philosophers and theorists of social sciences for centuries. Even Aristotle considered rhetoric, along with economics and strategy, to be one of the

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structural factors of political power (Cope & Sandys 2010). Despite the fact that the methods, carriers and contents of communication have changed over the centuries, it can be said that in the broadest sense, communication is basically a struggle for power and position. [Christianson-Galina 2017].

Strategic communication is a term used to denote the highest level of engagement of an organization's communication achievements in advancing its mission [Hallahan et al. 2007]. In the context of conflict, communication has the role of gaining psychological superiority over the adversary, and is part of a modern strategic approach to conflict management and warfare. From the point of view of the level of importance and influence on the realization of the functions of the state within the conflict, communications related to defense and security are viewed as strategic communications. In the context of national defense and security, strategic communication can be identified with any activity, statement, message, description and action of the armed forces of the state that affects the perception and opinion of the population that witnesses it, both in the area where operations are conducted (directly) and to the widest world (indirectly) [Helmus et al. 2007:171].

Strategic communication is one of the expressions of the state's power and represents an instrument in the political and security realization of national interests. In the context of contemporary conflicts, it is an expression of hybrid action that can have an offensive and defensive character. The main goal is to influence public opinion with the aim of changing attitudes towards cultural and political values [Mitrović 2019a]. Basically, the evident forms of strategic communication are systemic propaganda, public diplomacy and strategic advocacy [Mitrović 2019b]. Strategic communication aims to modify the ideas, emotions and behaviors of members of target groups, ie sections of the public [Taillard & Giscoppa 2013]. Strategic communication towards one's own and international, as well as the opposing public is most effectively carried out through modern media [Jungblut 2019], and one of the key preoccupations of mass media is influencing public opinion and creating media narrative and agenda [Perić, Krasulja, Radojević 2011]. "Practically, in the context of the war, the media evolved from a transmitter of information into a subject of strategic communication aimed at achieving dominance" [Mitrović, Perić 2021: 98].



## **Strategic communicators in armed conflicts**

National or state strategic communication in conflicts is realized through the actions of the subjects of strategic communication. According to Jungblut, there are six types of strategic communicators in conflicts: (1) political actors, (2) international organizations, (3) non-governmental organizations, (4) social and civic movements, (5) military organizations, and (6) terrorist organizations. [Jungblut 2019].

Political actors, as strategic communicators, view media reports as an instrument for shaping public opinion, use the media to increase public support for political decisions and policies, and as a basis for justifying military interventions and wars. In addition, there is a tendency of political actors to shape the international media information scene as a means of influencing foreign public opinion, and thus potentially influencing the foreign policy of other nations.

International organizations have less focused goals, primarily due to the often divergent interests of different member states. The most general goals that international organizations communicate through the media are the promotion and maintenance of peace, economic development and international cooperation, and the establishment of dialogue in conflicts. In achieving these goals, the media have the role of emphasizing the necessity of the existence of an international organization and providing funds for their work, although the proclaimed goals do not have to be correlated with the goals that are achieved in practice.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are very heterogeneous, thus their goals are very different. According to conditionally grouped goals, they can be divided into two categories: normative goals (social values, interests and rights of citizens, post-conflict consolidation of society, general security issues in post-conflict and conflict societies) and instrumental goals aimed at providing resources for the organization. By striving for a participatory presence in the media discourse, NGOs are in fact constantly promoting their mission and results, in order to motivate potential and existing donors. [Jungblut 2019:28-30].

Social and civic movements are organizations created around a common set of beliefs on the basis of which they participate in political and / or cultural conflicts [Diani, 1992: 1]. In the context of conflict and media

influence, their exposure is mainly in the domain of anti-war reports, protests and activities. The goal of their access to media reports is self-preservation, because without media visibility, the movement finds it difficult to reach the public, and thus future members.

Military organization is an important and unavoidable strategic communicator to the media within the conflicts. The main goals of military organization are to defend the country and its citizens from (potential and alleged) external threats or (potential and alleged) internal threats, and in certain cases the goal is to protect the population of another country [Kutz 2014].

Maltby distinguishes six forms of military strategic communication, each of which is related to a set of specific organizational goals and directed towards a specific segment of the target public [Maltby 2013]:

- 1) Striving to convince the political elite that a military operation justifies spending financial costs and possible human losses.
- 2) It addresses its own national public, with the goal of convincing its own population that a military operation is necessary. In this way, the military organization seeks to ensure the legitimacy and support of the public, especially when it comes to interventions in foreign territory [Hammond 2000].
- 3) Communication with the population in the conflict zone during the intervention, with the aim of conveying the message that the operation brings peace, stability, economic development and democratic governance.
- 4) Communication with members of the armed forces, where they motivate their members by explaining to them that the operation is supported by the general public, and that it is morally and socially valuable.
- 5) Communication with families and other groups closely associated with members of the military, clarifying the necessity of the operation and their participation in supporting members as a significant contribution to the positive outcome of the conflict.
- 6) Communication towards the opponent, by which he is convinced that the operation is organized and professionally led, enjoys international support, that financial and other resources are provided. Strategic communication with the enemy aims to reduce his morale, readiness to resist and to reduce the support of allies.

Terrorist groups carry out politically motivated activities, and their goals in strategic communications are legitimization, fundraising and gaining of



supporters, justification of violence, visibility in the international arena and gaining support. [Weimann & Winn 1994].

Sublimating the above, strategic communicators can be defined as advocates who address the media in order to convey their message in public discourse. At the same time, they usually do not give an objective presentation of representative facts about current events, but distribute messages that coincide with their view of the conflict, ie goals in conflict. In this case, strategic communication can be defined as the purposeful and deliberate use of convincing communication efforts in achieving the impact of news on the course and outcome of public debate, which leads to the realization of a particular policy [Jungblut 2019:21]. This is possible primarily due to the fact that the public perception of events abroad is mostly indirect, that is, the conflict occurs outside our direct sphere of experience, so the media influences the public perception of the conflict [Baden & Meyer 2018]. According to the essence of the impact, these strategic communications are ultimately focused on political and foreign policy decisions, which raises the question of the interaction of media and politics in conflicts [Habermas 2006].

### **Strategic communications and media: policy-media-policy cycle**

Strategic communication in the context of conflict is expressed through the correlation of media and politics in the function of influencing public opinion, with the aim of gaining support for achieving the goals of strategic communicators. The "policy-media-policy" (PMP) cycle, according to which changes in the political environment lead to a change in media performance, which further leads to a change in the political environment [Wolfsfeld 2013] is the basis for developing a model that includes aspects of gatekeeping.

Namely, PMP is a model of cyclical nature, which emphasizes the efforts of strategic communicators to distribute messages to the media in order to influence them and to achieve their goals. At the same time, reporting alone is not the goal, but the effects that are achieved on the audience. Furthermore, the PMP cycle represents the relationship between the political environment and media discourse, because in a political environment, political power can be transferred to dominance over the news. Applied to the production of news, Gatekeeping Theory deals with the

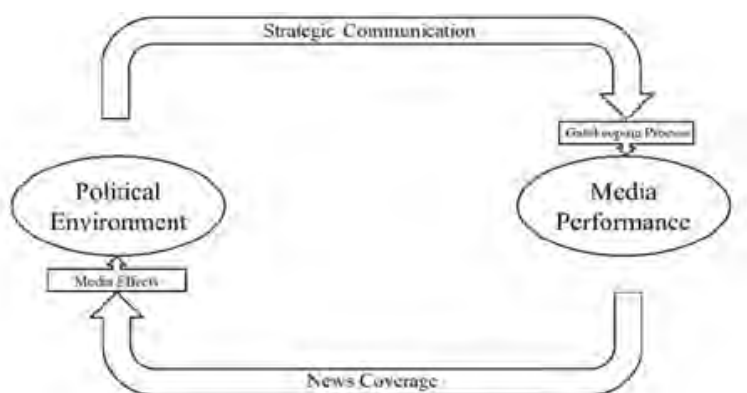


question of which event and information about it is turned into news, while the media allows fictitious events to be promoted to which individuals and social groups react strongly, because these events are intense and real for them [Perić, Krasulja, Radojević 2011].

In his study, which analyzed the correlations between politics and the media from the point of view of strategic communicators in conflicts, Jungblut confirmed the functioning of the developed model of influence "politics-media-politics" (PMP), emphasized media influence on the preparation of political decisions, the complex function of the 'information guardians' and that political organizations and the military have the strongest influence and that the influence of strategic communicators depends on the phase of the conflict and its duration [Jungblut, 2019].

A graphical representation of the general cyclical impact model of policy-media-policy (PMP) developed with the information control function is shown in figure that follows.

Figure 1. Cycle of interdependent influence of politics and media with developed function of gatekeepers [according to: Jungblut, 2019:89]



### **Application of the developed PMP model to the case of NATO aggression on fry 1999**

The modified cycle of PMP influence applied in the NATO aggression on the FRY in the spring of 1999 was analyzed. The analysis includes aspects that had a media reference, and in accordance with that, the most influential subjects are listed who created the media environment and achieved an effect on public opinion.



Political strategic communicator. The US Presidential Administration is the leading and most important strategic communicator within the NATO aggression on the FRY in 1999. According to Smith, the strategic communication conducted by the Clinton administration at the time had two main goals: the fight to gain support of the US public opinion regarding the bombing and the fight against anti-American propaganda in Serbia [Smith 2009]. In addition, the aggression was launched immediately after the process of reviewing President Clinton's suitability for the post, so the attack on weakened and the war-torn FRY allowed him to present himself to the public as a strong and determined leader [Kutz 2013]. With a strong lobbying approach of Albanian interest groups deeply incorporated into political and economic structures close to the then US presidential administration, as well as individual, personal economic interests of high representatives of this administration - all these are clear motives for a strong media campaign of political strategic communicators [Mitrović 2017].

International organizations. On several occasions before the NATO aggression on the FRY, the United Nations was a testing ground for the debate regarding the situation on the field. However, there was a deep division among the permanent members of the Security Council according to the way the problem should be resolved, which contributed to the UN being actively involved in the conflict only in its mature phase. As a body delegated by the international community, the OSCE established a Verification Mission, which was tasked with monitoring, recording and reporting on conflicts and human rights violations of all parties. After the conflict between the members of the terrorist KLA and the security forces of the FRY in the village of Racak, on January 15, 1999, there was a media escalation of the thesis about the alleged Serbian crimes. Namely, after the end of the conflict and the withdrawal of FRY security forces from the area around the village of Racak, Albanians changed their clothes in civilian clothes and removed their weapons [Krivokapić, 2019: 31-32], thus simulating a crime against civilians. The head of the Verification Mission, American diplomat William Walker, is urgently brought to the alleged scene of the alleged crime, accompanied by a French television crew. In a live broadcast, Walker reported to NATO Commander for Europe, General Wesley Clark, that the scene of the alleged massacre was "the most horrible thing he has ever seen in his life" [Perić 2019: 357]. After visiting the location of the alleged massacre in Racak, before any expert forensic analysis and without consulting anyone in Washington, Walker said at a press conference that it was a massacre and a crime against humanity. The effect of this statement was very strong, and acted as a catalyst for Western public opinion, beca-

use it was not difficult for "spin doctors" to carry out their intentions, as Serbs have long existed in the Western public as "on-duty culprits" [Perić, Kajtez 2013]. With the help of the prepared journalists, the news immediately spread over the planet, provoking a wave of condemnation of the Serbian people [Perić 2019:357]. Also, the NGO Human Rights Watch jumps in to help Walker by reconstructing the incident of the brutal crack-down of police forces on the basis of the statements collected from Albanian witnesses, reinforcing impressions by stating that "on many of the 23 bodies there were traces of torture". The German government even increased the crime in Racak in media reports in order to gain the support of the Parliament for participation in the intervention [Smith 2009:11].

Non-governmental organizations. In January 1999, a total of eleven NGOs operated in Kosovo and Metohija, forming the International Council of Kosovo NGOs. During the NATO bombing, from March to June 1999, almost all NGOs moved to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), where they worked together with NGOs from FYROM and Albania to help refugees. With the withdrawal of the YA from the territory of Kosovo and Metohija and the establishment of the UNMIK administration, about 400 NGOs were engaged in the territory at different time intervals and intensity by the end of 1999. Management of the work of a large number of NGOs is enabled by the establishment of the Executive Committee - ExCom, which consisted of six elected representatives of various organizations. American NGOs dominated, while smaller NGOs dropped out of the structure over time [Currion, 2010].

Social movements. As early as the beginning of the 1990s, the media actions of Albanians have been aimed at drawing the attention of world agencies to the alleged selective endangerment of the health of Albanian youth. Such scenes, despite amateur production and grotesquely bad acting, have traveled the world, with the aim of highlighting to the public the alleged threat to Albanian youth by Serbs. In the preparation of the Western society for the realization of the separatist goals of the Albanians from Kosovo and Metohija, the student movement was especially active, after the formation of the Independent Student Union of the Albanian Pristina University (ISUPU) in February 1997. The declared goals of the movement were to win the support of influential Western diplomats, "to intervene in resolving the Kosovo problem through diplomatic means, before the escalation of the open conflict, and based on the efforts of Albanians to get rid of the Serbian occupiers." [Nika 2018:173].



The army. The strategic communicator in the conflict was represented by NATO. In his address to the nation on the occasion of the launch of Operation of Allied Powers on March 24, 1999, the US President stated that its three main goals were: "proof of the purpose of NATO, preventing further bloodshed in Kosovo and inflicting serious losses on FRY forces in order not to endanger the people of Kosovo" [Smith 2009:16]. Rather, NATO's goals were (1) to dismantle Yugoslavia's competitive socialist economic system, (2) to gain control of valuable mineral resources, and (3) to gain control of the future energy distribution network (Ekemam 2017:4040). The actions of NATO communicators in the first half of the aggression were aimed at eliminating the possibility of indications that the NATO bombing caused an intensified refugee wave, but was primarily aimed at stopping Serb forces in ethnic cleansing, as well as repairing damage in the public caused by hitting civilian targets and the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. Despite the fact that the performance was not systematized, it was successful according to internal opinion, primarily on the basis of the previously created negative public attitude towards President Milošević, which had lasted since the beginning of the conflict in the former SFRY [Smith 2009].

Initially, the NATO Public Relations Center could not adequately respond to the demands of a synchronized political media message, due to the fact that the situation on the ground did not develop in accordance with plans [Lambeth, 2001], but also due to poor organization and staffing of the Center itself. That is why the PR Media Operation Center (MOC) was established with outposts in NATO headquarters in order to provide assistance to the NATO spokesperson (Schreiber et al., 1999: 80). About 30 members worked in the MOC cells on the following tasks: 1) planning and coordination of cells responsible for strategic aspects of public relations, 2) media monitoring and evaluation of media reporting, 3) support to the cell for internal communication within the NATO Strategic Command SHAPE Liaison Cell in order to provide the necessary information for the work of the staff of the Center, 4) Writers and Research Cell responsible for placing stories-reports-testimonies created by ghostwriting [Jertz 2001: 83].

Terrorist organization. According to all the characteristics of its action, the KLA predominantly used terrorist methods and tactics of struggle. Since the beginning of 1998, the KLA had carried out numerous attacks on security forces and civilian targets, killing and abducting large

numbers of police officers and civilians of all nationalities. Due to all the above, the KLA was placed on the list of terrorist organizations by the UN Security Council Resolution [UN 1998]. Initially, the administration also characterized the KLA's activities as terrorist, but since mid-1998, the situation has changed and it began to enjoy its support [Craig 1999].

At the same time, the KLA is intensively carrying out terrorist actions with the aim of provoking the response of the FRY security forces. The goal was to provoke the strongest possible response that would send civilians into exile, which would be a reason for military or "humanitarian" intervention. Critical debates in the Senate and Congress show that the position of political structures in the United States was not uniform in terms of relations with the KLA [Corn 2001]. Nevertheless, the opposition political structures did not have enough influence on the creation of general public opinion, so the KLA was simply left out of the list of topics, and its crimes remained far from known, especially to the US audience, but also to most Western European countries.

### **Analysis of media reporting on the war in fry – end of april 1999**

The analysis of the most influential print and electronic media in the United States, in the last week of April 1999, provides an insight into the environment created to gain public support for the bombing of the FRY [Vincent 2000]. As specially determined topics, terms in the function of variables of strategic communication are treated [Vincent 2000:326-335]:  
Terrorism: The broadcast message is clear and based on its interpretation in accordance with the ideological and institutional requirement, and reads: "Terrorism is free, it represents the terror of Serbs against Albanians, abuse of neighbors, women and children; the inspirer of terrorism is the dictator Slobodan Milošević, whose actions endanger the whole world and its order, and if he continues, it can develop as an uncontrolled epidemic, so the only way is to stop him and prevent him from further action. The role of "cure" against "terrorism" is played by NATO, which alone can stop this "evil" [Vincent 2000:328]:

Fear: A constant factor in presenting refugees and their stories. The use of terms describing aspects of fear has the potential to reinforce drama and further emphasize atrocities that have taken place in Kosovo.



Rape: Media content used the variable "rape" in the construction of narratives depicting the maximum absence of humanity in the performance of Serbs. This is a stereotype based on an earlier matrix of creating prejudice against Serbs as rapists [Hammond 2000, Perić, 2019].

Guilt: In the context of guilt, all troubles and evil, according to the narrative of the observed media, come from Serbs. It is an interesting case when the report states that the victims of the NATO air strike near Djakovica, Albanian civilians, ever after a clear acquaintance with the fact that the attack on their column was carried out by NATO aviation, loudly and aggressively accuse Serbs of attack [Hammond 2000].

"Evil" Serbs and "dictator" Milošević: Language constructions using "terror", "rape", "guilt", "fear" lead to portraying Serbs as absolutely evil, and their leader is the personification of the dictator. This approach allows the creation of a network of simultaneous reports that quote each other, so the audience is congested and accepts the claims as true. In that situation, for the public, nothing else is a logical solution but to use everything possible against so much evil, more precisely to use the NATO military machinery. In this way, public opinion supports the actions of their armies, recognizing that thus, part of their national identity (army) and thus themselves (but from their living room), are fighting against the evil of the world. The media distributes simple and seemingly logical information to the audience, without the possibility of reviewing the opinion, statement or claim, and without the opportunity of hearing the answer from the other (Serbian) side [Vincent 2000].

Crazy, irresponsible and calculated behavior: In order to realize the construct of irrational behavior of Serbs, the descriptions use synonyms: brutal, barbaric, rude, criminal, devilish, infernal, immoral, ruthless, evil, perverse, painful, relentless, non-Christian, crazy, demonic, etc.

Missing topics. In addition to the strong influence on the control of information, in some cases there were also those that portrayed the situation differently. Namely, it is noticeable that there was avoiding and ignoring of topics that objectify the situation. Thus, the causes of the conflict and the genesis of the problem are not considered at all, as well as the abandonment of negotiations in Rambouillet by the Albanian side. The immediate reason for aggression, the "Racak case" in spite of individual reports of independent journalists remained "invisible". Efforts

were made especially to prevent any negative connotations of Albanians. Thus, despite specific allegations and evidence of links to organized crime and drug trafficking, KLA funding went unnoticed. [Vincent 2000:334]. Ignoring "missing topics" has also proved effective in linking the KLA to terrorism and direct links to al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden or the forced mobilization of Albanians by the KLA [Vincen 2000:335]. Some reports regarding the negative connotations of the KLA were in the form of interviews, which emphasized the subjectivity of the statements and relativized the "sin" of the KLA. According to objective views, the media in the United States were obsessed with reporting on the crimes of Serbs against Albanians, while the fact that Albanians contributed to raising tensions was completely suppressed [Vincent 2000].

### **Conclusion**

The media have a strong stimulating effect on the creation of public opinion. In the context of wars and security issues, the media are a powerful weapon in creating an image of reality with the public, encouraging fictional, indirect, but powerful experiences, and becoming particularly effective in the event of a state of war [Stauber 2013]. The media is a powerful tool for mobilizing the nation in relation to participating in armed conflict, because "in modern times, societies are highly integrated in terms of communication, through the mass media." [Buschmann 2001: 102]. 'Thus the last conflicts of the previous century were characterized by large information-communication-propaganda activities in order to provide the support of the public' [Perić 2008: 172].

In the case in question, the media in the USA predominantly strived to simplify the story as 'pro and con', thus creating a strong relations towards that topic, ie creating support for the war against FRY. Since the public can be described as the broadest form of democratic government or the 'ultimate democratic authority' [Schudson 2008:13], it is evident that its power influences political elites in creating political decisions. With this in mind, there exists undoubtable reverse influence of media and politics, with clear and evident position of the 'information controllers' who based on various motives and reasons influence the message and topics in the media. "We are faced with media institutionalization of the victims as the argument of support to war engagement, by creating patterns of victims and heroes thus influencing public opinion to support the military action" [Mitrović, Perić 2021:99].



Strategic communicators are subjects of communication who, through their engagement, strive to achieve their key interests. Strategic communicators have been identified in the conflicts: political entities, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, social movements, the military and terrorist organizations. The administration of President Clinton (political strategic communicator) and NATO (military strategic communicator) had the strongest influence on information control in the politics-media-politics (PMP) cycle. Other subjects had a supporting role and did not visibly, significantly or systematically influence the creation of themes or narratives.

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