



## PRACTITONERS' CORNER

### **The News Media and the Resolution of Ethnic Conflict: Ready for the Next Steps?**

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Today's ethnic conflicts confront the news media with unprecedented challenges. This is especially relevant given the increasing complexity of such conflicts. This study is, by necessity, a work in progress, yet it is also part of a larger, ongoing effort to more narrowly review and analyze the role of the news media in explaining ethnic conflict and conflict resolution, as well as the way media consumers interpret and make use of information about such questions. Its aim is not so much to make specific points, but rather to provoke an ongoing debate about the role of the news media in covering conflict and its impact on media consumers. More specifically, does the news media cover conflict in such a way that only serves to inadvertently undermine and destabilize the process of resolution? Or can it play a role that upholds its highest professed aims and principles, (as well as what is necessary for its economic survival), while simultaneously contributing to public education and, in the process, approaching conflict in such a way that does not undermine support for efforts at resolution or democratic institutions?

Media organizations have tremendous influence in shaping public opinion and the views of public officials. The media's portrayal of ethnic conflicts, as well as the steps in their resolution, thus has immense consequences for conditioning public attitudes and influencing policy responses. It is an odd relationship acknowledged by the media, policymakers, and media consumers alike. The media influences the public, which in turn acts in complex ways to influence public officials and policymakers. Furthermore, in what can be described as a kind of 'echo chamber effect', public officials use the media to promote their views and aims on given issues, thus often refracting back to the public the very views which may have had a role in influencing the policymakers in the first place. The media thus have a profound role in influencing and conditioning the determination of policy. But it is also a role which, in many ways, increasingly reinforces the original assumptions of the media consumers.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the initial coverage of events is crucial for setting the tone for what follows. But the depth and nuance necessary for substantive coverage of conflicts is in many ways antithetical to the methodology and requirements of the modern media. This is particularly true when addressing the delicate steps in a peace process. The media, particularly the broadcast media, require controversy, conflict, certainty and confrontation. Its stock in trade is the thumbnail exposé. Yet the elements most necessary to better understanding conflict, such as nuance, ambiguity and complexity, are filtered out, or avoided altogether. Efforts to provide context are often perceived as complicating matters, yet even well-intentioned efforts to lend context to conflicts, when offered at all, have (often inadvertently) reinforced stereotypes, favored the conventional wisdom, and led to historical oversimplification. In many cases the seemingly unresolvable 'ancient ethnic conflict' paradigm suits the requirements of the modern media, serving as a convenient and easily packageable concept which precludes more complex investigation and analysis. This underscores legitimate and far-reaching questions about whether the news media is equipped at all to respond to the ever-changing complexities of conflict resolution.

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<sup>1</sup> Conversation with Ambassador Robert Frowick, 23 February 2001, conversation with Frank McCulloch, [formerly with the Los Angeles Times], 22 May 2001. See also Seib (2000).

Yet the stakes are enormous. US news media coverage of ethnic conflict has, in many respects, undermined the building of popular support for a constructive American role in international assistance, in part due to the nature and specific emphasis of the news coverage Kull (2000 and 2001).<sup>2</sup> Misrepresentation of the sources of conflict, as well as the prospects for resolution, is part of a larger failure of effective assessment which can contribute to a faulty determination of policy. While reporters cannot be burdened with all of the blame for this state of affairs, the perils of misleading analysis are all too apparent. When analyzing international news media coverage of ethnic conflicts, and examining the responses of media consumers, one frequently hears similar descriptive catch-phrases and truisms (Public Forum 2001).<sup>3</sup> Yet the origins of such views are important to investigate, if only because their pervasiveness in American life and opinion often undermine efforts at resolution. These conflicts are often described as 'ancient ethnic conflicts' pitting 'neighbor against neighbor' which are rooted in, and conditioned by an abstract and seemingly unknowable 'history' (Public Forum 2001b, 2001d). While generally acknowledged as tragic, these events often persist because 'that's just the way those people are' (Public Forum 2001d, 2001h, Plate 1996, Greenfield, 1998). Such statements have tremendous consequences for shaping public opinion, as well as for influencing the views of public officials. They also speak to concerns about whether the news media can ever equip itself to make the transition to the next level of peace processes, or whether it will remain rooted in ideas and preconceptions about the nature of conflict which do not necessarily hold up under closer scrutiny.

Where do such views come from? Are these conflicts truly as rooted in history and as deterministic as such dicta would have one believe? Why do more complex causations so easily defy media interpretation? These questions are especially relevant today as we embark upon the post-imperial and post-Cold War era, and they have significance far beyond today's contemporary ethnic conflicts. For, if the news media is unable (or unwilling) to explain the causes of ethnic conflicts in ways that take into account their complexity, then the prospects for continued international support for conflict resolution will become increasingly problematic.

The challenges for the news media, and policymakers, are manifold. While the 1990s proved to be a primer on global geography, the first few decades of the new century may very well witness much more upheaval and dislocation. World atlases may have to be revised annually. One factor is that territorial boundaries often do not conform with ethnic boundaries. For instance, when the colonial empires collapsed in the years after the Second World War, many newly independent peoples found themselves with artificial borders determined by, in many cases, European colonial powers in faraway capitals.

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<sup>2</sup> The United States, for example, is an active, if at times reluctant, participant in international efforts to provide aid and other indirect supports to many areas in conflict. The US can be (if sometimes grudgingly) a significant source of reconstruction aid and loans, as well as occasionally (if very reluctantly) supplying peacekeepers and peacekeeping assistance. If economic development, infrastructure building and community support are increasingly seen as significant factors in long-term conflict resolution, then the role of the United States and, perhaps crucially, the opinions and attitudes of the US population toward overseas assistance programs, will continue to be an important factor. Indeed, the US government will only be as generous as (and, in most cases, less than) it believes public opinion will allow it to be.

<sup>3</sup> These informal discussion forums – or focus groups – were conducted over a period of three months with the valuable assistance of the Santa Rosa Junior College's adults and seniors current events discussion program. The findings emerging from these forums do not profess to be scientific samples, but rather are part of an effort to engage 'heavy users' of news media in an ongoing dialogue about their reactions to the news coverage of foreign affairs and ethnic conflicts. These ten forums, or discussion groups, were conducted between March and May 2001 in the Northern California cities of Cloverdale, Santa Rosa and Healdsburg and included more than 500 participants, hundreds of whom also completed written surveys and questionnaires on the news media. The author would like to acknowledge and thank the participants and the Santa Rosa Junior College for their cooperation and assistance.



Various ethnic groups thus turned up in the same nation state, or were divided by arbitrary borders and placed in different states, or dispersed over various states. One of the central themes of the new century may very well be about rearranging this complex state of affairs Jalali and Lipset 1997: 77f., Cheetham and Hewitt 2000: xi-xv).<sup>4</sup>

These future conflicts, like the ones of the past decade, will have many colorations, ranging from low-intensity, non-violent struggles such as those between the Flemings and Walloons in Belgium, the Francophone and Anglophone communities of Quebec, and the Czechs and Slovaks from the former Czechoslovakia. Other conflicts will feature low-intensity, yet violent, struggles, such as has been seen in Northern Ireland and the Basque provinces. And finally, the most frightening prospect, we may continue to see high-intensity violent conflicts such as occurred recently in Rwanda and Burundi, as well as in parts of the Balkans (Jalali and Lipset 1997: 77f.).<sup>5</sup>

The concept of self-determination has helped the United Nations grow from 26 signatory nations of the United Nations Declaration in December 1941, to 51 members of the original United Nations in 1945, to 156 nations in 1990, to 190 today. The United Nations has estimated that of those nations only twelve can be described as ethnically homogeneous, and in more than sixty states the population is divided among more than five significant groups. And within those 190 states there are perhaps as many as 80 active ethnic conflicts and 2,000 discernible national identities (Jalali and Lipset 1997: 77f.). Many of the new states have emerged out of the ashes of collapsed communist states. Even in seemingly stable states like Britain or Canada, nationalist groups – Scottish, Welsh, Francophone – may pursue UN status of their own (Schmemmann 1999).<sup>6</sup>

How will the international news media adjust to these ever-changing circumstances and challenges? Critical analyses of the media's handling of foreign news is nothing new (see for example Knightly 1975). Yet a vital, if often ignored question, is: how will the news media respond to the new challenges of ethnic conflict in the 21st century.<sup>7</sup> Judging by the precedents of the 1990s, the prospects are not encouraging. And yet, the media's portrayal of these conflicts will have huge consequences for shaping public attitudes, and thus conditioning how the world community responds, if at all (Public Forum 2001d, 2001g).

Media consumers in the US have expressed uncertainty about the ability of the news media to address these challenges. They express fear that the media, and particularly the broadcast media, is essentially provincial, and will only provide them with news and information about a given conflict that has the potential to involve the United States (Public Forum 2001a). Many consumers have grave misgivings that the news agenda is heavily shaped by the corporate dictates of the media conglomerates (Public Forum 2001e). Yet they also recognize that they have scant options for news and information about the world (Public Forum 2001i, Grayling 2001).

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<sup>4</sup> Many of these conflicts may share some common causations, such as the unsettled residual and lingering consequences of the end of empires (see Barkey and von Hagen 1997, Grayling 2001, Mandelbaum 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Yet, if globalism and the demise of a bipolar world have been contributing factors behind the multiplication of nation-states, the eruption of violence is still difficult to explain. With or without violence, nation-states have proliferated at a staggering rate, and the prospects for further dissension are immense.

<sup>6</sup> The sociological forces behind these conflicts are nothing new. Postwar Africa, for example, has been troubled by conflicts since the colonial powers gave the continent its arbitrary borders, whereas many of the crises in the provinces of the former Soviet Union may be not so much the consequences of any new nationalism than legacies of Soviet nationality policies designed to divide and rule.

<sup>7</sup> For an excellent analysis of the many new and complex questions the media will be confronted with, see Seaton (1999).

When the news media do focus on world conflicts, it frequently emphasises one particular causation at the expense of other possible explanations. Media concentration on 'ethnic identity' and 'history' with its stress on inevitability and determinism, can often overlook the critical political and economic factors that contribute to violence. Such approaches can contribute to popular misconceptions of wars being fought solely for 'historical' and 'ethnic' reasons which are beyond the comprehension of everyday media users (Responses 2001).<sup>8</sup> Increasingly, historical context is offered, if at all, as a 'final verdict.' In many cases, historical analogies and precedents are used, not to lend context or substance to a particular conflict, but to support an all-encompassing theory to explain a specific conflict (Rudolph 1993).

There are numerous explanations for why national groups might themselves seek to mythologize their histories. After all, as the French philosopher Ernest Renan once noted, getting history wrong is an essential factor in the formation of a nation (Hobsbawm 1997: 270, Alterman 1999, Hobsbawm 1997). While that may partly explain the often inaccurate or heavily mythologized versions of group histories, it does little to explain why the external independent news media, particularly the broadcast news media, should so readily embrace and repeat such highly partisan interpretations of the origins of conflict, and why so many media consumers seem so susceptible to such interpretations (Public Forum 2001f, Anderson 1991).

A common wisdom that has emerged is that the lifting of the cold war system has released ancient ethnic ambitions and hatreds, potentially leading to a world far more complex and dangerous than the familiar bipolar East and West. Certainly for the news media, the Cold War struggle was in many ways a much easier contest to cover, with the seeming simplicity of the Moscow-Washington dichotomy. In contrast, today's ethnic conflicts are seen as presenting the news media with myriad problems. In many respects, the depth and nuance necessary for substantive coverage of ethnic and religious conflict are perceived as antithetical to the methodology of the modern media, with its emphasis on celebrity culture, entertainment, market shares, ratings, and the financial bottom line. Thus, the news media's half-hearted efforts to lend context to ethnic politics have often reinforced stereotypes and led to oversimplification.

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Many media consumers have made much use of the multiplicity and wide variety of broadcast and print options now available, yet the feeling persists that 'more' options does not necessarily equate with 'better' or better quality coverage (Public Forum 2001a, 2001g). The coverage of the Balkan wars of the 1990s, for example, may have underscored this point. What is remarkable about the coverage of this crisis is that it was covered not by a few networks or foreign 'beat reporters' but by numerous news organizations and scores of broadcast outlets. Yet this proliferation of the quantity of news services and intensified competition did not necessarily improve the quality of the coverage. Recall for a moment the way the news media resorted to the 'ancient ethnic conflict' explanation for the crises, which was often emphasized merely because many Balkan nationalist leaders sought to use it as a justification for their actions (Bonner 1995, Morrow 1993, Preston 1996). Unwittingly or not, the international news media lent legitimacy to such claims. Much of this was due to sloppy journalism, but in many ways

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<sup>8</sup> Yet many media users respond that they would like more historical context to the coverage of ethnic conflicts, and, in fact, the former publisher of the Washington Post, the late Philip Graham, once described journalism as the first rough draft of history. Yet many journalists today, and most particularly the consumers of media, have allowed the media's interpretations of such matters to reign supreme, often without qualification, context or further explanation. As one respondent to our media survey put it, media consumers frequently take the news media, and printed word in particular, 'as absolute fact.'



it occurred because the 'ancient ethnic conflict' paradigm fit neatly with the demands of the modern news media. 'The Battle of Kosovo', wrote Time Magazine's Lance Morrow, 'when the Turks, advancing west toward Vienna in 1389, defeated the Serbs and left their bodies to the crows—might have been the day before yesterday.' (Morrow 1999, Preston 1996) Such comments served as a convenient and easily packaged rubric precluding further investigation (Horowitz 1985).

Media consumers' willingness to embrace the 'ancient ethnic hatreds' account speaks to another question involving the media's interpretation of history: the matter of 'historical myth' and its relationship to the origins of conflict. Indeed, separating historical facts from myths is never an easy task, particularly in areas of heated dispute. Many consumers came away from the coverage of the Balkan wars, for example, with deeply held beliefs about the 'inevitability' of turmoil in the region and the intimate relationship between 'history' and contemporary events. For example, discussions about the historic relationships between various ethnic groups often conclude on the pessimistic note that these contemporary struggles have been going on for a many centuries, leaving the lasting impression that some peoples have been struggling against one another throughout all of history. 'Is it better to remember or to forget?' wrote Time Magazine's Lance Morrow in the midst of the Balkan conflict. 'Forgetting – even without its sainted better half, forgiveness – is sometimes the only route to sanity. If only the Balkans, for example, could be engulfed by a massive forgetting. As it is, every generation of Serbs remembers, as if it were last Saturday, their defeat by the Turks at the Battle of Kosovo in the year 1389. The result has been centuries of self-renewing reciprocal atrocity between Serbs and Muslims. Massacre is the Balkan national flower.' (Morrow 1997) Thus the news media often desires an explanation which fits neatly into their preconceived notion of 'ancient ethnic hatreds.' (Finn 1999)

Matters such as these may seem like abstract points from the vantage point of foreign news bureaus, but they are matters of huge importance to the future of areas of conflict. Such questions have often reinforced the assumption that the only way out of many conflicts is ethnic partition or the creation of a mono-ethnic state, and that ethnic diversity is simply incompatible with a nation state. It may indeed be useful to point out that, even if the Balkans may ultimately have to be partitioned, it may happen not necessarily (as much of the US broadcast media has alleged) because of 'ancient ethnic conflicts' or a 'lethal history' but rather because of the very real abuses that have occurred due to the contemporary conflict in the region. The cycle of violence in the Balkans in the past decade has created a logic of its own, where ethnic cleansers committed acts of terror not necessarily due to ancient grievances, but often in response to the very acts of violence that have occurred in recent history.

The great debate of the 1990s over what US policy in the Balkans should be was significantly influenced by such media interpretations of the 'historic roots' of conflict and thus the US's inability to respond. The news media made much of the fact that US Secretary of State James A. Baker (1989-92) implied that grand historical forces were at work in the Balkans and remarked that the United States thus 'did not have a dog in the fight', unwittingly echoing Bismarck's nineteenth century comment that the whole of the Balkans was 'not worth the bones of one Pomeranian grenadier.' Lawrence Eagleburger, a former Ambassador to Yugoslavia, added that there was little or nothing outsiders could do to alter the course of Balkan 'history.' 'I have said this 38,000 times, and I have to say this to the people of this country as well', Eagleburger said. 'This tragedy is not something that can be settled from outside and it's damn well time that everybody understood that. Until the Bosnians, Serbs, and Croats decide to stop killing each other, there is nothing the outside world can do about it.' (See also Holbrooke 1999 and

Zimmerman 1999) Since the news media, particularly the media organs based in Washington and most susceptible to the 'echo chamber effect', are so dependent upon 'official comment' and establishment confirmation, comments such as Baker's and Eagleburger's carried immense weight, and were not easily or lightly challenged.

The news media, and particularly the broadcast news media, immediately joined this theme. Baker's and Eagleburger's statements were also significant because they helped set the tone for the next stage of coverage. The broadcast media, in particular, was working at a disadvantage, for it is the broadcast media which relies so heavily upon the accepted wisdom of official Washington. It is the broadcast media which is much less likely than the print and non-broadcast electronic media to go beyond official circles or the 'usual suspects' of television punditry to explain the complexities of foreign ethnic conflicts (Allcock 1998, Ellis 2001). Strangely enough, the national news media, after exhausting the sources of official Washington and central casting from the pundit class, next began to manufacture hundreds of stories about the 'historic roots' of the conflict in the Balkans (Ajami 1999, Leff 1995).

Many reporters unintentionally contributed to the seemingly irrational and inchoate nature of the conflict. The work of freelance journalist Robert Kaplan, for example, has now been much examined.<sup>9</sup> Kaplan's contribution might have remained nothing more than a curious footnote to a broader story if only President Clinton hadn't discovered his work and recommended it to others, (what the New York Times termed 'the dangers of letting a President read.' [Kaufman 1999])<sup>10</sup> Much of the rest of the news media was not far behind Kaplan. 'Official' Washington soon began to frequently repeat the line that what plagued the Balkans was not the opportunism of contemporary political leaders or deeper economic, social or political problems, but rather the consequences of a 'lethal history' which had produced a genocidal mind set among entire peoples for successive generations ('Balkan Ghosts' 1999, Sadkovich 1998).

Headlines such as 'For 600 Years, Violent Nationalisms Have Bloodied the Balkans', 'The Balkans' Heritage of Hatred', and 'This Will Never Be Over', 'Ancient Fears and Hatreds Pervade the Countryside', continued to appear with increasing frequency in the mainstream news media well into the late 1990s (Morrow 1999, Ajami 1999, Hesser 2000). Strangely enough, this occurred at the very time that a number of other observers of the Balkan conflict began to pursue a very different track. What they found was not necessarily centuries of ethnic hatred as portrayed in the media, but rather a more complex story of coexistence, punctuated by occasional crises and violence.<sup>11</sup> Noel Malcolm (1998), for example, sought to resurrect a deeper history of the region, one that eschewed simple explanations for what happened such as 'ancient ethnic conflicts' pitting 'neighbour against neighbour' which are rooted in, and conditioned by, an inchoate and ungraspable historical past. Malcolm, among others, argued that the 'ancient ethnic hatreds' thesis was grossly misleading. For one, it failed to underscore the degree of historical coexistence and even cooperation among the peoples of the Balkans. It also tended to over-emphasise elites and the struggle among them, rather

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<sup>9</sup> Eschewing detailed historical research, Kaplan relied upon his own immediate observations, his interviews with contemporary ethnic politicians, and his intense reading of the works of an earlier renowned travel writer, Rebecca West. In fact, Kaplan was so enamoured of West's observations that he merely repeated many of them, along with their ethnic generalizations and simplistic version of ethnic history which she so successfully wove in the 1930s and 1940s. Kaplan also embraced West's detestation of the Ottoman Empire and he too was ready to blame the regions many and complex problems on the Sultans in Istanbul, despite the fact that the Ottoman Empire had ceased to exist in 1919, and that much of the violent turmoil in the Balkans occurred during the Second World War, and, after 1987 (see Schmemmann 1999 and Goltz 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Clinton later acknowledged that he had 'misread Balkan history.' (Seelye 1999)

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Bennett with his Yugoslavia's Bloody Collapse and Karen Barkey, for example, sought to look anew at the history of the peoples of the region.



than looking at the history of the region from the bottom up.<sup>12</sup> One would come away, Malcolm warned, from the 'ancient hatreds' argument with a vague but convenient sense that the history of the Balkans is too complicated (or even trivial) for outsiders to master. Other observers began to fear that the news media's excessive use of historical arguments merely served the ambitions of opportunistic contemporary leaders in the region, who were only too happy to point to the 'ancient ethnic hatreds' thesis to underscore the alleged deterministic nature of the crisis and to excuse their more aberrant behavior (Dobbs 1999, Fisher 2000, Deak 1998).

Many media consumers, particularly the heaviest users, were indeed often hungry for further context that would help establish the proper sense of 'background and motivation' of the conflict. Yet frustration persists that the media's less than perfect efforts to provide historical context often only further complicated matters (Rubin 1999, Wilkinson 1999). When violence in Kosovo began to grab world attention, the media had already been reporting warnings that NATO might need to occupy the Balkans for years to come. It thus seemed to many that a durable peace anywhere in the Balkans was an unattainable goal. The conflicts by and large stemmed from ancient hatreds, many in the media asserted, and while such tensions might be buried for years or decades, they would ultimately surface. Such coverage further demonstrated that while it is certainly dangerous to underestimate the weight of history, it can be just as problematic to overestimate it. Certainly socio-ethnic tensions in the Balkans, as elsewhere, have produced cycles of killing and revenge, thus providing the political context for more conflict, but such crises also require other contributory factors which, by necessity, must be very much of the present.

These matters soon found their way into the American political class, where elected officials, no doubt obtaining much of their information from the news media, began to repeat the same sorts of themes. Perhaps one of the more remarkable examples occurred during the 1999 debate over whether NATO should mount a ground operation in Kosovo (Boustany 1999, 'Orthodox Church' 1999). The news media not only helped to manufacture historical 'precedents' which were repeated in Congress, but then echoed those Congressional misstatements as if they were revealed truths ('Balkan Ghosts' 1999, Goltz 2001, Sadkovich 1998, 'Ethnic Hatreds' 1999, Fearon 1999). This occurred several times during the debate over what did or did not actually happen in the Balkans during the Second World War, a dispute hotly followed in the news media because of its alleged consequences for the seemingly imminent ground invasion of NATO forces in Kosovo.<sup>13</sup>

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The coverage of the Balkan crisis was not necessarily uniquely bad. For example, US news media coverage of the conflict in other areas, such as Northern Ireland,

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<sup>12</sup> Malcolm and others such as Serif Mardin and Dennison Rusinow also revised the history of the Ottoman Empire in the region, emphasizing the allowance of local autonomy, among other factors (see Richardson 2000, Mardin 1997, Rusinow 1996).

<sup>13</sup> Members of Congress repeated manufactured media mythologies on the House and Senate floor, such as that a small handful of wartime Yugoslav partisans brought the might of the German army to a standstill in the western Balkans, or that the Germans kept almost one million troops in Yugoslavia to keep down a courageously resisting population, (when in reality the struggle for Yugoslavia was completed in only twelve days with only 151 German casualties). One Senator told a national television audience that the Yugoslav resistance kept 21 German divisions tied up in the Balkans (the Germans never had more than four divisions there). These strangely incoherent arguments had a huge impact on driving public opinions about what might happen in the Balkans during that time. Only a handful of publications sought to challenge the accuracy of such statements about the Balkans during World War II (see Ellis 2001, Whitney 1999, Yevtushenko 1999).

demonstrated similar problems. Broadcast and print agencies had produced relatively little coverage of the Northern Ireland problem prior to the growing US involvement there after 1993. Thus, the opportunity emerged for shaping the views of the public because so few had preconceived ideas about the conflict, which had often been for the most part covered for the international press by London-based media bureaus or stringers. This, coupled with the constraints of space, time, and the presumed lack of interest on the part of the American public, naturally precluded much coverage of the day-to-day questions of the ongoing peace process. Nor was there much substantive coverage of the more complicated issues at stake in the years that followed. Stories about violence continued to garner most of the attention. There thus continued to be frequent stories about bombings and killings, but little about the day-to-day progress of peace negotiations, of the nuance of the societal roots of the conflict, the contemporary political and cultural environment, or the intricacies of various peace initiatives.<sup>14</sup>

Many American media outlets emphasized Ireland's alleged 'tragic history' without going into any detail about what that history actually contained (Candaele 1999).<sup>15</sup> Much of the news media, when focusing on Northern Ireland at all, frequently sought to interpret almost any tragedy that occurred in Northern Ireland in the context of 'ancient ethnic hatreds.' (Hillenbrand 1998, Taylor 1998, Candaele 1999)<sup>16</sup> The Irish novelist Dermot Bolger has lamented that 'we must go back three centuries to explain any fight outside a chip shop.' (Walker 1996: 58f., Brown 2000) This approach to conflict, most prevalent among the columnists and opinion makers, continued for years after the initial breakthroughs in the peace process. 'Among the Irish, a bardic genius for remembering', wrote Time Magazine's foreign affairs columnist Lance Morrow, 'the grievances singing in the genes, has kept the kettle of sectarian vengeance boiling since the Battle of the Boyne in 1690.' (Morrow 1997)<sup>17</sup> Such attention to the 'historic roots' of conflict may, in some cases, be doing a disservice to media consumers by relentlessly emphasizing the past at the expense of very real contemporary factors. This approach leaves one with the impression that such conflicts are unresolvable, thus to many observers 'ancient ethnic hatreds' has been the paradigm easiest to accept; a position that often conditions official policy determinations, reinforcing a sense of 'time collapse' where observers of, and participants in, a given conflict make references to an often heavily mythologized past as if it occurred very recently (O'Brien 1995, Fisher 2000). Many conflicts may stem in some part from old divisions, but it often takes a political elite, seeking to maintain power for themselves, to exploit such grievances into something larger (Grayling 2001, Fisher 2000).

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<sup>14</sup> American broadcast coverage of events in Northern Ireland often followed the dictum of local television 'if it bleeds it leads' (see, for example, 'Two killed in shooting at Catholic-owned bar in Northern Ireland', CNN.com, 3 March 1998, 'Blair Condemns Northern Ireland Arson Deaths', CNN.com, 12 July 1998, Miller 1998, 1999, Tuohy 1996). On the broadcast news the names of several of the participants in the process were mispronounced, their parties misidentified (Hamilton 1996, O'Toole 1998).

<sup>15</sup> Back in Washington, the whole affair provoked bafflement on the part of the Washington-based pundits, or was ultimately often seen as an exercise in futility.

<sup>16</sup> The tenor of the coverage changed little even when events lent themselves to more substantive coverage. The broadcast media coverage of the historic Good Friday Agreement of 1998, for example, demonstrated the perils of journalism by celebrity correspondent. Several US broadcast networks sent well-known broadcast correspondents to Northern Ireland who subsequently demonstrated little familiarity with the political terrain.

<sup>17</sup> Yet other journalists sought to lend context to the problem without resorting to such deterministic rhetoric (see, for example, Brown 2000a, 2000b, Candaele 1999, Hamilton 1996, O'Toole 1998, Pogatchnik 1999, Cowell 2000). Much of the American news media also failed to note that violence was also occurring within the respective communities, not solely between them.



The antagonists are often very real, but they are not always necessarily 'historic' or 'ancient'—and may not be so very different from those in conflicts elsewhere. More nuanced coverage of contemporary developments, such as economic change, modernization, social upheaval, class mobility, and religious identity, would no doubt aid in creating a fuller understanding of a given conflict. Even some contextual discussion of these conflicts in a framework of imperialism and decolonization might be instructive (Orme 2000).<sup>18</sup> Yet due to the pressure to 'be first' and an unrelenting emphasis on the 'bottom line' in journalism economics, as well as time and spatial constraints, the media often simply reject many of the very factors that might be addressed to produce better, more nuanced, coverage of foreign ethnic conflicts. Instead of increased coverage of subtle and complex trends and processes (which, granted, are not only difficult to discern but challenging to explain) we have the ubiquitous and oft-sensationalized 'human interest story.' Such reportage only further serves to fuel an inchoate atmosphere of 'something must be done', yet at the same time undermines and obscures the understanding and subtlety necessary to make better sense of a given conflict. The media often fetishises the symbolic, thus making symbols, either human or material, more important than they might otherwise be. This is partly due to the growing ascendancy of the broadcast media at the expense of print journalism. The broadcast media works under profoundly different pressures than print journalism. Broadcast news divisions have smaller 'news holes' than newspapers and magazines and thus have less flexibility in going into much detail about a given subject and taking the time to explain various sides and perspectives, and the broadcast media's obsessive dependency on pictorial images make it more beholden to superficial symbolism and the sensational. The economic pressures of broadcast journalism force newsgathering institutions to compete for valuable time and advertising with the entertainment portion of the media, thus placing pressures on the news media to be entertaining at the expense of informative. Beyond that, the broadcast media is increasingly relying upon paid commentators, often former journalists or former government officials, in many cases operatives from political parties or corporate-sponsored think tanks, to give immediate and certain answers to profound questions that have confounded specialists for decades. These instant analysts, or pundits, seek to explain a specific crisis or conflict with short, entertaining answers, which often only serve to impart a sense of helplessness and confusion on the part of the media consumer.

One further problem common to this kind of broadbush approach to ethnic conflicts is that it commonly leaves the impression that many of these problems are deterministic or foreordained, thus inadvertently aiding the handiwork of the ethnic cleansers and sectarian ethnic politicians who are seeking exoneration and legitimacy for their actions (Cohen 1998).<sup>19</sup> Many media consumers, even the most savvy 'heavy users' of the media, often demonstrate difficulty delineating between the strictly 'news' portion of the media from the 'opinion' portion, which is occupying an increasingly greater share of air time. Analysts of the news media can only ignore this steady transformation at their

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<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, acute economic distress is a significant, if often misunderstood, factor in many ethnic conflicts, and resolution approaches which emphasize the necessity for economic development are often seen by media professionals as highly complex questions which will only complicate a story and confuse media consumers. Yet while some media consumers say they would appreciate more coverage of the economic subtext to conflict, the economic question remains relatively low on media consumers' lists of priorities.

<sup>19</sup> Many media observers have concluded that for lasting peace in areas of conflict, the world must have the ability to spot and prevent those conditions before violence begins. With the news media merely reacting to event after event, media users lament that they have little idea where future conflicts may arise. Consumers also lament that more routine day-to-day coverage of news and events around the world is rarely pursued, as opposed to news coverage which merely reacts to crises. For example, if the news media are drawn to ethnic brush fires, there is the less dramatic fact that many regions where ethnic violence was thought probable have handled their transitions, so far, with some success.

peril. Pundits and commentators are increasingly prominent in discussions about world affairs. In many cases, the media consumer receives 'primary' information about a specific conflict from talk shows or broadcast opinion commentators.<sup>20</sup>

This may also contribute to a kind of 'breathless' broadcast coverage of peace processes, which, for example, often overemphasizes the nature of ephemeral consensus and heavily play up the 'peace' angle while simultaneously downplaying the equally important point that a 'process' implies an ongoing commitment to peace and reconciliation. The media often seek to satisfy an impatient human need for 'closure' in a given conflict, whether or not a clear and final resolution is within sight. Furthermore, the proliferation of conflicts makes it more difficult for users to follow world affairs. Many consumers possess less essential knowledge about today's conflicts than they did about the seemingly 'simpler' foreign policy issues during the Cold War era, and are thus more dependent than ever on the news media for information and interpretation about complex foreign crises (Forum 2001b).

Yet the media itself is undergoing a profound transformation, at the very time that it is still seeking to address the new challenges thrown up by globalization and the Cold War. Media mergers and corporate ownership increasingly dictate the substance of coverage, with alarming consequences for those urging a more considered approach to foreign affairs.<sup>21</sup> Modern conflicts are increasingly complex and often difficult for reporters to immediately grasp and convey to their audiences. Well-intentioned reporters have often lamented the lack of resources and time for further study and investigation for issues such as those raised herein. Private, business-oriented philanthropies have created foundations which are seeking to improve the coverage of business issues and economics, while journalism schools and fellowships are emphasizing issues such as ethics. While these are all worthy causes, certainly deserving of the funds allocated, stepped up efforts might perhaps be made to include working reporters in forums such as this.

Yet many media consumers in search of more substantive coverage are also increasingly making use of the Internet as a means to obtain the news and information they desire. Consumers often lament that the corporatisation of the news business has produced a 'sameness' to much of the media and has also led to the disappearance of easily obtainable 'alternative' publications (Grayling 2001, Public Forum 2001c). The Internet may help revive what was once a thriving media culture of alternative voices, now somewhat drowned out by the corporatisation and homogenization of media.<sup>22</sup>

## References

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<sup>20</sup> See references to the rise of the pundit class in James Fallows (1996). The broadcast media, and particularly vehicles with more programming time such as the US cable news networks and the Public Broadcasting System, are also increasingly relying upon manufacturers of popular history to explain complex, multi-layered controversies which have occurred far beyond their areas of expertise. Whatever other merits these instant analysts may possess, their pontifications on the recent elections, say, in the former Yugoslavia, are usually completely irrelevant and often erroneous to what is actually happening there.

<sup>21</sup> For sources on the increasing corporatisation of the news media see Bagdikian (2000), Barnouw (1998) McChesney (2000).

<sup>22</sup> Can the Internet Provide an Alternative? It has thus far provided a means for media consumers to eliminate the barriers of time and space between them and the kind of news they may desire. Many consumers have increasingly expressed a desire to have more choices, and not be limited to local 'hard copy' media sources. Granted, not every media consumer is going to go looking for more substantive coverage of world events, and a preliminary survey of the question seems to demonstrate that media consumers will behave on the net much the same way they previously behaved prior to their use of the Internet.



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