

# Television Wars (Crossing a Line in Serbia)

**From the Archive:** President Bill Clinton's bombardment of Serbia in 1999 marked a grim turn in the practice of "information warfare," with a lethal NATO attack targeting a Serb TV station which criticized the war, observed war correspondent Don North.

By Don North (Originally published on May 4, 1999)

On April 23, 1999, at 2:06 a.m. Belgrade time, as NATO was preparing for its 50th anniversary celebration in Washington D.C., two cruise missiles struck the Radio Televizija Srbija (SRT) headquarters in Belgrade.

About 150 civilian journalists, producers, technicians and janitors were working the nightshift when the missiles hit with what NATO called "surgical precision."

The building's four stories collapsed to the ground, sandwiching offices, television equipment, transmitters and people into a pile of smoldering rubble only 15 feet high.

TV screens throughout Serbia went blank in the middle of a Houston, Texas, TV station's interview with Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic. Firemen rushed to the scene to remove the injured. One technician trapped by tons of concrete could be extracted only by the amputation of both legs.

As the smoke and dust settled, at least 16 people were confirmed dead, another 19 injured and others were missing and feared buried in the rubble. But NATO's premeditated attack on a civilian media target did little to drive SRT off the air.

By daylight, alternate transmitters had been activated and Serb TV was back on the air again. That morning, a blond woman was reading the morning news and calmly placed the devastation of SRT several minutes down the lineup of top news stories.

Few foreign journalists had believed that NATO actually would bomb SRT. But the Serbs did – and were prepared.

The Clinton administration and NATO made no apologies for the civilian dead. "Serb TV is as much a part of Milosevic's murder machine as his military," said Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon. "The media is one of the pillars of Milosevic's power machine. It is right up there with security forces and the military."

## **A Quiet Acceptance**

The reaction to the SRT bombing was muted within many U.S. news organizations. Elsewhere, however, journalists and humanitarian organizations, including Amnesty International and Reporters Without Borders, condemned the strike against SRT.

Notable was a terse letter to NATO's Secretary General Javier Solana from the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists: "NATO's decision to target civilian broadcast facilities not only increases the danger for reporters now working in Yugoslavia but permanently jeopardizes all journalists as noncombatants in international conflicts as provided for in the Geneva Conventions. It represents an apparent change in NATO policy only days after your spokesman Jamie Shea offered assurances that civilian targets would be avoided."

From Belgrade, the Association of Independent Electronic Media in Yugoslavia, a leading voice of Serbian anti-Milosevic sentiment, also condemned the attack. "History has shown that no form of repression, particularly the organized and premeditated murder of journalists, can prevent the flow of information, nor can it prevent the public from choosing its own sources of information," the groups said.

The *New York Times* quoted a senior Serb journalist saying he thought NATO had crossed an ambiguous moral line: "The people who were there were just doing their jobs. They have no influence on the content or on Milosevic. I hate Serb television. [But] we can differentiate between big lies and little ones." [NYT, April 24, 1999]

Yugoslav officials said NATO was trying to destroy the free marketplace of ideas and insure that just one side's "propaganda" could be disseminated.

## **Offending NATO**

There is no doubt that SRT was a propaganda organ for Milosevic and his regime. Since the NATO bombing campaign began on March 24, 1999, SRT also had deeply offended NATO's sensibilities with its graphics.

The NATO symbol was regularly shown turning into a Nazi swastika and Madeleine Albright grew Dracula teeth in front of burning buildings.

While highlighting the suffering from NATO air attacks, SRT ignored the tens of thousands of Albanian refugees fleeing Kosovo with their tales of rape and execution. SRT repeatedly showed video clips of old scenes: Milosevic meeting Serbian church leaders, Russian envoys and the Kosovo Albanian leader Ibrahim

Rugova.

But the station also broadcast to the world dramatic images of destruction caused by the NATO bombing and gave credible estimates of civilian casualties. SRT scooped the world press when it disclosed that a NATO aircraft had killed scores of Kosovar refugees in a bombing attack.

After SRT broadcast the scenes of the civilian carnage, NATO flip-flopped through the next 24-hour news cycle. NATO's first response was: "We didn't do it, the Serbs did it." That changed to "we did bomb the column, but the Serbs killed the refugees." Finally, NATO accepted fault and apologized.

Still, NATO's glib cockney spokesman, Jamie Shea, pushed the edges of Orwellian doublespeak when he declared that the pilot had "dropped his bombs in good faith."

Later, NATO played an audio-tape supposedly of the pilot in question. But it turned out that the recorded pilot was involved in a completely different operation. The real tape was withheld.

The SRT bombing, however, was no mistake. Internally, NATO had been debating for weeks whether or not to destroy Serb television.

Shea even suggested that the network might be spared if it would begin broadcasting at least six hours of Western news reports reflecting NATO's views. Ironically, SRT had been broadcasting many of NATO's pronouncements, albeit focusing on the misstatements and contradictions.

Still, though the bombing of SRT may have been aimed at the Milosevic propaganda machine, it also set back American and other foreign TV efforts to document the siege of Belgrade. Most of the video broadcast on international TV showing the results of bombing raids was obtained from SRT.

### **Controlling Information**

Even before the SRT attack, NATO's struggle to control the information flow had riled many leading Western media outlets.

On April 9, 1999, editors and executives of seven major U.S. news organizations – including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and CNN – protested to Defense Secretary William Cohen and urged him to loosen controls on information about the air strikes.

"Detailed information about the allied operation is vital to an informed public discussion of this matter of national interest," the letter said. "On many days, the state-controlled Yugoslav media has been more specific about NATO targets

than the United States or NATO.”

Historically, of course, the U.S. military has always been uncomfortable with American journalists reporting from behind enemy lines. Many senior U.S. officers are veterans of the Vietnam War and believe that American journalists should tailor their reporting to support the cause.

In that vein, Harrison Salisbury, the famous war correspondent for The New York Times was hailed for his reporting from the siege of Leningrad in World War II, when the Soviet Union was allied with the United States.

But when Salisbury became the first correspondent from a major U.S. newspaper to report from Hanoi during the Vietnam War, he was denounced as disloyal. In December 1966, Salisbury wrote, “Whatever the explanation, one can see United States planes are dropping an enormous weight of explosives on purely civilian targets.” His work earned him the nickname “Ho Chi Salisbury” at the Pentagon.

CNN’s Peter Arnett smuggled a satellite phone into Baghdad and reported live during the Persian Gulf War. His stories included moving first-person accounts of civilian targets destroyed by U.S. air attacks. In Washington, Arnett was subjected to insults as traitorous “Baghdad Pete.”

### **Sparing Americans**

Some similar tensions – though not as severe – have surfaced in the current war for Kosovo. In the case of the SRT attack, however, U.S. officials were careful not to worsen relations with the American news media by accidentally killing U.S. correspondents.

In mid-April, about a week before the cruise missiles were launched, the White House reportedly tipped off the CNN brass about the impending attack of SRT headquarters. CNN bosses called Belgrade and ordered CNN’s people out of the SRT building where they had been preparing TV reports for a month.

Other reporters, however, did not get the word, or chose not to believe it. *The London Independent’s* Robert Fisk, an intrepid Western reporter, said he was invited to the doomed building for coffee and orange juice by Goran Matic, a Serb government official. Matic was convinced that the TV studios were next on NATO’s target list.

“Yet, oddly, we didn’t take him seriously,” Fisk reported. “Even when the air raid siren sounded, I stayed for another coffee. ... Surely NATO wouldn’t waste its bombs on this tiresome station with its third-rate propaganda and old movies, let alone kill its staff. Once you kill people because you don’t like what they say, you change the rules of war.”

The content of SRT broadcasts also was more complicated than NATO has asserted.

Besides serving as a Serb government voice, SRT was a center of cultural identity for the Serb nation. With the destruction of SRT headquarters, thousands of tapes and films have now been crushed to rubble, videos that once helped tell the Serbs and their children who they are – and provide some small comfort in their difficult lives.

Among the tapes smashed and burned was a program that I produced called “Servus, Adieu, Shalom,” a documentary tracing the long history of Viennese Jews, their persecution, their suffering in the Holocaust and their community’s resurgence in recent years.

The film was my donation to the UNESCO video bank. It was translated into the Serb language and distributed by UNESCO to SRT and other Balkan TV stations strapped for funds to buy quality programs.

My tape was being used in Belgrade as part of international efforts to encourage the region’s ethnic groups to overcome their historic hatreds.

There is also the question whether NATO’s briefings, aired live by CNN and other Western all-news networks, constitute propaganda as dubious as what appeared on SRT. On April 20, 1999, for instance, Shea reported that ethnic Albanian boys were forced to give blood for Serb casualties.

Though highly inflammatory, the allegation was made without attribution and without verifiable details. On April 22, Serbian Health Minister Leposava Milicevic denied Shea’s report, and Shea did not respond.

The mix of NATO propaganda and the selection of Serb targets also may represent a broader psychological warfare campaign against the Serb people. Gen. Wesley Clark, the American NATO commander, announced that NATO was seeking targets to “see to it that the morale of the people in Serbia continues to erode.”

Since the April 23 bombing, SRT transmissions have jumped from one site to another in hopes of avoiding the next bombs. Now, high on NATO’s target list is Politico Television, another outlet of Milosevic’s power structure in downtown Belgrade.

*The London Guardian* interviewed a 29-year-old tape editor, Vena Ducic, who was working the nightshift there along with about 100 other employees. “I am terrified,” Ducic said. “But I have two boys, so if I give up my job what do we do tomorrow?”

Beyond breaking the Serbs’ will, however, the attack on SRT was a blow to the

world's ability to view unfettered information, even when it is interspersed with propaganda.

Paul Scott Mowrer, a correspondent for the *Chicago Daily News* during World War I, understood the need for a maximum flow of news at a time when human lives are in the balance. He wrote: "In this nation of ours, the final political decisions rest with the people. And the people, so that they may make up their minds, must be given the facts, even in time of war, or perhaps, especially in time of war."

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