

Konstanty Gebert

Media and ethnic conflict

Overview

Media is always ethnic, in the sense that, being produced in the language of a given ethnic group, it unavoidably strengthens the reader's identification with that group. Historically, the development of the press in 19th century Europe solidified existing nationalisms (as in the case of the French and German press after the war of 1870 and in the run-up to WWI), facilitated the survival of threatened ones in nations deprived of their own state (Polish-language press in partitioned Poland), and especially – facilitated the development of new national identities (Lithuanians, Czechs). This rule holds true as well for borderline cases (the Zionist press in early 20th century Europe, transforming Jewish self-identity from religious to national; contemporary Romany and Kurdish media stimulating a sense of nationhood in nations afflicted by a lack of a unifying language; the Rwandan Radio Mille Collines broadcasting in the Kinyarwanda common both to Tutsis and Hutus, and articulating a program of Hutu genocide of the Tutsis). It remains valid even in many contemporary democratic multiethnic societies (witness the role of Quebec's French media in promoting separatism).

Yet on the other hand the aspiration of media is to be universalistic, i.e. to cover not only the world of the ethnic group in whose language it is produced, but simply the world. The fact that it is produced in a certain language is not a matter of choice, since a universal non-ethnic language (with the failed exception of Esperanto) does not exist. Furthermore, although covering the entire world is for obvious reasons an unattainable ideal, it is rare to encounter media who voluntarily abandon their universalistic aspirations to lock themselves up in an ethnic ghetto. (The editor of a Hungarian daily in the ethnically mixed Romanian town of Timisoara told me in the early Nineties: "Of course we do not cover Romanian issues. If a reader wants to find out about those, he can buy himself a bloody Romanian paper".) But even with this caveat, reporting starts at home and, as in the case of the unavoidable if not necessarily intentional impact of writing in a given language, the proportion of coverage allocated to "us" vs. "the rest" reinforces the ethnic connection. The non-intentional character of this relationship is of course confirmed by the fact it can be seen also in the American press, where the "we" group is presently civic, and not ethnic, in nature.

Paradoxes of ethnicity in the media are highlighted in cases when media either cover an ethnic conflict, or even more when they themselves are part of it. The crucial tenet of impartiality, often assumed to be the bedrock of journalistic practice, rarely holds when the journalist, and his media, describe a bloody clash while expected not to make value judgments, and becomes completely untenable when the ethnic group for which the media write or broadcast is party to that conflict. On the other hand, media in those cases are seldom innocent observers, unwillingly caught up in the maelstrom; more often than not, media themselves are one of its precipitating factors. The relationship between journalistic obligations, individual conscience and group solidarity needs to be fleshed out in more detail.

The course will provide an overview of these issues. Starting off with a historical presentation of the development of ethnic media in 19th century Europe, it will continue with a general discussion of principles of professional journalism and their application to issues of ethnicity and ethnic conflict. From there it will proceed to examine in some detail three contemporary

cases of such conflict, and the role played by both local and international media: the Middle East, Rwanda and the Balkans. An in-depth study of this latter case, both due to the abundance of literature on it and the lecturer's personal experience of it, will constitute the principal part of the course. A special session will deal with practical issues: students will role-play the editorial boards of two media involved on opposing sides of a conflict, produce copy, edit, and compare results. The course will wind up in the presentation of case studies, dealing either with particular issues of media and ethnicity drawn from the experience of the student's own countries, or with particular issues (sourcing; pros and cons of assigning ethnic reporters etc.) which would have elicited their interest. Students will be requested each to produce both a report on readings and a case study, one of those, at their discretion, being the main term paper.

The lecturer is not an expert on media, but a working journalist, who over the last dozen years has covered ethnic conflict i.a. in the Balkans and in the Middle East. Due to this, the course will have more of a nuts-and-bolts than an academic orientation.

Academic aims

The course provides general knowledge of the historical development of the media in connection with problems of ethnicity. It discusses issues of journalistic practice connected with this particular area. It gives students an in-depth understanding of the way media have participated in recent ethnic conflicts and shaped perceptions of it, both locally and abroad. It examines in particular detail the role of media in the wars of Yugoslavia, and deals also with the Middle East and Rwanda. It compares contemporary ways of dealing with ethnic issues in selected countries, and provides tools and methods for assessing media performance. It concentrates particularly on print media.

Learning outcomes

Students will learn how media have influenced the formation and perception of ethnicity in 19th and 20th century Europe. They will study the development of recent ethnic conflicts and the role played in them by the media. They will acquire basic skills for media coverage assessment, for tracking down bias, and for setting realistic expectations for coverage. They will get hands-on experience in scrutinizing text, and in producing copy of their own. Through studies of media they are familiar with, they will learn how their own perception of issues might have been influenced by media coverage.

Sessions outline

1. Introduction to media and ethnicity.

The role of media in promoting ethnic identities will be discussed on the basis of examples from surviving and nascent national movements. The interaction between media, education and politics will be discussed. Conclusions will be drawn for the general functioning of media.

Related reading: Mitchell Stephens: *A History of News*. New York 1988; Viking Penguin. Section V: Reporting, pp 215-273.

The target group as a crucial concept for media functioning. Ambitions of universality vs. limitations set up by readers' expectations. Dependence on founders, advertisers and sponsors. Conflict sells newspapers. The concept of journalistic impartiality, and ethical

issues in maintaining it and in giving it up. Individual conscience, group solidarity and professional obligations.

Reading: Donald R. Browne, Charles M. Firestone, and Ellen Mickiewicz: Television/Radio News and Minorities. Aspen, Colorado 1994; The Aspen Institute. Philip Knightley: The First Casualty. From the Crimea to Vietnam: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist and Myth Maker. New York, London, 1975; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Section 17: War is Fun, pp. 401-427.*

2: The war in Yugoslavia: An overview.

Development, course and consequences of the war. Media involvement and its impact. Conflicting perceptions.

Reading: Laura Silber, Allan Little: The Death of Yugoslavia. London 1995, Penguin Books.

Local and international coverage.

The role of local media coverage in the build-up of the conflict. International and local media: different priorities. Implications for coverage.

Reading: Matthew Collin: This is Serbia Calling. London 2001, Serpent's Tail.

James Gow, Richard Paterson, Alison Preston: Bosnia by television. London 1996, British Film Institute. Part I&II, pp. 11-103.

Miles Hudson, John Stanier: War and the Media. Phoenix Mill, Gloucestershire, 1997.

Chapter 12: The Balkan Tragedy, 1991-1996, pp. 263-303.*

Press Now: Free Press in South-Eastern Europe. Top Priority. Part I: Media in Former Yugoslavia, pp. 29-69.

Mark Thompson: Forging War. The Media in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. London 1994, Article XIX.

3: The War in Yugoslavia: What we saw and what we did not see.

Selected DVD viewings of the BBC series: The Death of Yugoslavia, followed by discussion.

4: The war in Yugoslavia: Oslobodjenje – a case study.

Sarajevo's independent daily and its war coverage. Is it possible to combine partisanship with objectivity? The challenge and limitations of non-ethnic media.

Reading: Gojko Beric: Letters to the Celestial Serbs. London 2002, Saqi Books.

Tom Gjelten: Sarajevo Daily. A City and its Newspaper under Siege. New York 1995, HarperCollins.*

Kemal Kurspahic: As Long as Sarajevo Exists. Stony Creek, Conn., 1997.

The war in Yugoslavia: A culture of lies?

Is falsehood a cultural characteristic? The concept of "culture of lies". Serb lies, Croatian lies – a shared trait? Balkanism and Orientalism as Western concepts of interpreting the Other. The Balkans as enigma. The culture of misunderstanding and the culture of lies.

Reading: Ivan Colovic: Politics of identity in Serbia, New York University Press, N.Y. 2002

Dubravka Ugresic: Culture of lies. Penn State University Press, 1998. "The culture of lies" pp 66-86.

Maria Todorova: Imagining the Balkans. New York, Oxford 1997: Oxford University Press.

5. The international correspondents: Can they be trusted?

The specificity of the profession. Consequences of covering war instead of broader events. Pressures and their implications.

Reading: Greg McLaughlin: *The War Correspondent*. London 2002, Pluto Press. Chapters 1, 6, 8 &9.

Anthony Lloyd: *My War Gone By, I Miss You So*. London 1999, Doubleday. Chapters 6 and 8*

Jon Steele: *War Junkie*. One man's addiction to the worst places on Earth. London 2003, Corgi Books.

The Middle East Conflict: We are part of the story.

Media as integral part of the story. Resisting bias: a hopeless task? The medium is the message, but what is the message?

Reading: Jim Letterman: *Battle Lines*. The American Media and the Intifada. Boulder, 1992, Westview Press.*

Philo, Greg, and Berry, Mike: *Bad news from Israel*. Pluto Press, Ann Arbor MI, 2004

6-7 The Middle East conflict: What is manipulation?

Viewing of the films: "Decryptage" by Jean Tournero [in French, with English subtitles], "Jenin, Jenin" by Muhammad Bakri, and "The Road to Jenin" by Pierre Rehov, followed by discussions of media manipulations relative to the Middle East conflict.

8 Rwanda: a genocide ignored.

An overview of the conflict in Rwanda. The lack of interest of the international community, and of the media: coincidence or co-culpability? What else are we ignoring?

Reading: Pierre Chretien: Rwanda – la propagande du genocide. In: Renaud de la Brosse (Ed.): *Les medias de la haine* [in French]; Paris 1995; La Decouverte, pp. 22-56.

Additional reading: Romeo Dallaire: *Shake hands with the Devil*. Carroll & Graff Publishers, 2005.

9 Discussing student term papers

10. Covering contemporary ethnic conflict: an overview.

The Nineties as a decade of ethnic conflict. The role of the media in covering conflict and shaping its perception. Interaction between media and foreign policy.

Reading: Edward R. Girardet (Ed.): *Somalia, Rwanda and Beyond*. The role of the International Media in Wars and Humanitarian Crises. Dublin 1995, Crosslines. Section II: Media and War, pp. 67-135.

Simon Serfaty (Ed.): *The Media and Foreign Policy*. New York 1991, St. Martin's Press. Chapter 3: David R. Gergen, *Diplomacy in a Television age: The Dangers of Telediplomacy*, pp. 47-65.