

Myth and the Media, by Philip Hunt

Paper for “MEDIating Globalisation: Challenges for International Journalism in the 21st Century”

Executive Summary

Research into the media during the last part of the 20th century clarified the role that mass media news coverage plays in supporting and maintaining popular culture. This characteristic of the media is more easily observed when the news coverage is about someone else’s culture. Drawing on his experience in charge of World Vision’s work in the Middle East and Eastern Europe from 1997 to 2000 Philip Hunt gives a number of examples of how the news coverage of conflict works to support the foreign policy aims of the prevailing culture, and how facts and events are presented or distorted to achieve these ends.

Hunt then puts forward a hypothesis to explain this phenomenon that draws together the work of media sociologists and recent developments in anthropology, in particular the work of Rene Girard on the role of scapegoating and the victimage mechanism. The hypothesis suggests that the mass news media play a necessary part in the maintenance of culture that is much more far-reaching than the simple reporting of events.

More than ten years ago during a visit to Israel I saw with my own eyes Israeli settlements being built on confiscated land in violation of UN resolutions. At the same time, news media were reporting the Israeli Prime Minister’s declaration that “no new settlements are being built.” It required a considerable mental sleight of hand to maintain that this was accurate. And it was clearly less than the truth.

At the time I thought this was a question of journalistic competence. After all, how hard was it to go into the Occupied Territories and see what was really happening?

Soon enough I changed my hypothesis. Now I tried to explain that it had less to do with how journalists practise their craft, than how spin doctors practise theirs. I thought that what I was seeing was the difference in reporting between accuracy and truth. In the movie “Absence of Malice,” one of the characters comments on a news report that “it is accurate, but it’s not the truth.”

So, following this line of thinking, namely that the journalistic process was somehow captive to the art of spin-doctoring, I tried to accommodate the notion that I had not seen a “new settlement” but one of a number of possible alternatives.

Possibly I had seen merely the expansion of an existing settlement. Not a “new” settlement. Most news media did not comment on or even hint at this subtlety.

Possibly I had seen land confiscated for “security reasons.” Not a new settlement, but one of the expanding no-go zones created for the necessary work of protecting the security of Israel.

This way of rationalising what my eyes could see and what the media reported was only satisfactory up to a point. Obviously, there was clearly an accuracy versus truth issue at work. Yet, I continued to find it mysterious why so few journalists seemed to want to apply their own truth-seeking counter-spin to the statements of officials. It seemed to me that something more was going on. Something deeper and more fundamental must be at work to cause this kind of news reporting to dominate.

Much academic research and analysis of the past 30 years reveals that, in fact, something more fundamental is at work. It is beyond the scope of this paper to summarise the vastness of that research. Writing back in the 1976 study of British television news, “Bad News: Volume 1”, the Glasgow University Media Group describes television news as “a cultural artefact.”¹

Dr Richard Hoggart in the foreword to the same study has a particular comment about the role of culture in shaping news coverage. The “most important filter ... is the cultural air we breathe, the whole ideological atmosphere of our society, which tells us that some things can be said and others had best not be said. It is that whole and almost unconscious pressure towards implicitly affirming the status quo, towards confirming ‘the ordinary man’ in his existing attitudes, towards discouraging refusals to conform, that atmosphere which comes off the morning radio news-and-chat programmes as much as from the whole pattern of reader-visual background-and-words which is the context of television news.”²

Many since have taken up this link between culture and news. In this paper I discuss the integral role that mass media news coverage plays in the myth-creation that is at the heart of primitive processes of creating and maintaining cultural cohesion. When it is effective in this role, societies experience peace and a sense of community. When it is ineffective in this role, societies experience fragmentation and violence.

You will recall that just about 2 years ago, just after Easter 1999, NATO bombed Serbia³ in response to the Serbian invasion of Kosovo. Serb troops, police and gangs, were pushing the Kosovars south into Albania and Macedonia. In a few days, a few hundred thousand were displaced. In retaliation, NATO bombs were dropped on Belgrade and other sites. CNN had a crew on the ground in Belgrade. They also had a crew at NATO headquarters. The world media relied on two main sources for their news. Military spokespersons at NATO HQ in Brussels, and Serbian Military HQ in Belgrade. All pictures of bombs being dropped were supplied from NATO HQ and all pictures of damage on the ground was controlled by Serbian Military HQ. Television news reports were comprised of verbatim coverage of briefings from NATO HQ and pictures on the ground in Serbia authorised by Serbian Military HQ.

None of this surprises us. But CNN wanted to make a point about journalistic integrity. Whenever they showed a picture of the damage on the ground in Serbia, they ran a super to the effect that pictures from Serbia were controlled by the Serbian authorities. CNN wanted the world to know the caveat that they could only show the world what the Serbian authorities would allow them to show. The inference was that the Serbian side of the story might not be true, or might not be accurate. Maybe some of these craters were not caused by NATO bombs. Maybe that building the Serbs said was a hospital was actually a chemical weapons factory.

Now, I want to make the point that I think CNN were perfectly correct. It was undoubtedly clear that the Serbian propaganda machine was at work. By reminding us that CNN was captive to a Serbian-controlled news machine, they were doing viewers an important service. It was important that we took the Serbian claims with a grain of salt. Things might not be as they appeared.

¹ “Bad News: Volume 1”, Glasgow University Media Group, page 1.

² Ibid., foreword by Dr Richard Hoggart, page x.

³ I use the term “Serbia” here to distinguish that part of Yugoslavia that is effectively governed from Belgrade. This allows one to treat Kosovo as a separate entity. I mean to make no political point, nor to be seen to be advocating the further dismemberment of FRY but simply to reflect the situation at the time.

But you can probably also see the other point that needs to be made. CNN never once ran a super saying that reporting from the NATO side was controlled by NATO authorities. There is a lie in the corollary that NATO news was not controlled. When, of course, it was just as highly controlled as on the Serb side. Ever tried to take a picture of a NATO military aircraft without permission? CNN did not see that it might be important for the world to know the caveat that they could only show the world what the NATO authorities would allow them to show. CNN did not seem to think it was important to allow the inference that the NATO side of the story might not be true, or might not be accurate. We might come to the conclusion that maybe some of these craters really were caused by NATO bombs. Maybe that building NATO said was a chemical weapons factory was actually a hospital.

Why does this happen? Sociologically, it is clear that news coverage serves the foreign policy of the prevailing culture, regardless of whether that is NATO culture, or Serb culture. Few people in the West seem to have any problem with the notion that the news media in Belgrade were highly controlled and presenting a distorted view of reality. What is more surprising is that the news media are so reluctant to be objective about NATO media control.

But is it “control”? Are the NATO spin doctors in charge, or is something more fundamental at work? One example shows that “the cultural air we breathe” may have an unconscious effect in ensuring that the news supports the needs of maintaining the prevailing culture.

That example is that during the Balkans conflict there was a change in the way the Serbian negotiators were portrayed just prior to the NATO bombing. Two months before the bombing, after the first round of negotiations, the New York Times (24 Feb 99) summarised the Serb position like this:
“Mr Milosevic has shown himself at least as reasonable as the ethnic Albanians about a politics settlement for Kosovo.”

Perhaps you will recall that the main sticking point was what kind of international peacekeeping force would be used to enforce a settlement in Kosovo. Back in February, two months before the NATO bombing, it was widely reported that the Serbs were open to some kind of international presence in Kosovo, but they favoured something that was truly international. The New York Times summarised their position as “ideas that include leavening Western forces with lots of Russians.” As an aside, you may also recall that, in the end, this is exactly what happened when the Russians simply turned up on the ground to help out.

Agence France Press reported in February that an unnamed Contact Group member had actually put a compromise: an international force for Kosovo under the flag of the United Nations or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) rather than NATO. The Serbs signalled that they might accept such a force, but the US ruled it out immediately. Madeleine Albright went on CNN during the February talks to insist that it was NATO or nothing.

But as bombing talk grew louder, the portrayal of the Serbs changed. The same New York Times reporter who had described the “reasonableness” of the Serbs now declared in a March 24 story that Milosevic had refused “every opportunity” to avoid NATO bombing; that Milosevic stubbornly “can’t agree to a foreign force on Yugoslav soil because of history or politics or whatever”; and that “if there had been any sign of compromise” the officials (that is, the US negotiators) “probably wouldn’t be on the way to the airport right now.”

What had changed? As far as the Serb position was concerned, nothing. On March 23, the day prior to this report, the Serbian leadership reaffirmed its earlier position in a series of parliamentary resolutions which rejected the NATO position because it envisioned 28,000 NATO troops with the right to move anywhere in Yugoslavia—something the Serbs considered to be little better than a NATO occupation.

More significant though was a Serb restatement of the resolution to accept an international presence in Kosovo once other matters had been sorted out.⁴ Such resolutions now were treated with cynicism and disbelief, while similar statements from the NATO side were taken at face value. As one writer puts it “the notion that NATO as well as Yugoslavia should be expected to compromise went almost totally unexpressed. Yugoslavia, on the other hand, was portrayed as inflexible when its overtures represented anything less than total capitulation” to the idea that NATO itself and alone, would police an independent Kosovo.

Later, when Russia did deploy her own troops in Kosovo, the New York Times lead story reflected the common NATO news coverage position in a story that began “The West and Russia agreed for the first time today on the need for an international military presence in Kosovo to keep an eventual peace.” Hello? The Russian position had not changed. What had changed was US intransigence in the light of the Realpolitik of Russian soldiers at the Pristina airport.

Throughout, the Serbs and the Russians were portrayed as stubborn, which might have been accurate, except that NATO was at least as stubborn. When the Serb and Russian position of a NATO-plus peacekeeping force prevailed, it was the Russians and Serbs who were portrayed as shifting their positions, when it was NATO who had actually backed down.

What is going on here? Do the spin doctors cast a magic spell over journalists that cause them to miss the truth?

French academic, Rene Girard, suggests that the “magic spell” idea might be closer to the truth than we realise. But it is not spin doctors and journalists who are spellbound. It is each society as a whole.

Girard’s hypothesis is that culture was originally formed in acts of scapegoating violence. That primitive cultures first formed when people discovered the power of being part of the mob that murders the scapegoat. The all-against-one camaraderie of accusing and murdering the victim created a common bond. Community formed in common cause.

But the peace and community cohesion that was generated by scapegoating violence could only be maintained if the community really believed that the scapegoated victim was guilty. This is where myth comes into the anthropological picture.

Myths were created. First, to maintain the guilt of the victim and the rightness of the community’s action in murdering him or her (or, sometimes, *them*). Second, to revisit and re-enact the violent event which the community now described as its birth. In other words, ritual and religion emerged to keep the story going.

Soon, these myths began to permeate society. They shape the institutions of society—the way it administers justice, the way it celebrates its national identity, the way it handles its politics, the way it plays sport, the way it reports on world events. All of these become imbued and laden with the mythical values and ideas that work to remind people of the

⁴ This analysis is based on “Redefining Diplomacy: Press rewrites history to paint Belgrade as ‘hard line’” by Seth Ackerman, <http://www.fair.org/extra/9907/Kosovo-diplomacy.html>

guilt of the scapegoat, and the rightness of the scapegoat's murder. As societies mature, of course, substitute scapegoats emerge.

First, actual humans are sacrificed as a ritual substitution for the original murder. The community is caught up in the horror and wonder of the scapegoating mechanism again and community cohesion is maintained a little while longer.

Later, animal sacrifice is substituted for human sacrifice. And after a while, hundreds and thousands of symbolic sacrifices litter the culture to ensure there is a daily dose of scapegoating to allow people in the society to expel their violence in socially acceptable ways.

In this Girardian hypothesis, rituals such as Question Time in Parliament, and our national sporting competitions, and more subtle actions such as keeping up with the Joneses, all provide subtle ways of regenerating the community-creating results of scapegoating violence.

And so, to finally come to my point, news coverage is part of this cultural milieu as well. It is not a question of journalistic competence, nor of media mogul conspiracy. The mass media's tendency to report in ways that support the cultural status quo is a natural consequence of being part of the very powerful cultural processes at work in our society.

The role of myth is to obscure itself. It only works well when you don't see it working. For example, if I were to tell you that the people of Longreach rose up yesterday and burned a witch because she was responsible for last year's bad harvest, you would all say that this was stupid. No-one believes in witches any more. Or, if you do, you don't believe they are responsible for Longreach harvests.

Yet, when I suggest that Question Time in Parliament is a form of scapegoating violence, some will not see what I mean. The reason is that faith in the political myths remains strong in our society, although it is breaking down.

If I were to suggest that John Howard's inability to say "Sorry" was based on his being captive to the myth of *terra nullius* most non-Aboriginal Australians will tell me I've gone a bridge too far. Or tell me I am off with the fairies. Or just say "Eh?"

So lets not go there.

To summarise, we live in societies in which the scapegoating mechanism continues to provide the basis for most of our cultural institutions. We should not be surprised to discover that it provides the basis for the institution of journalism as well. And the implication from that is that our reporting will unconsciously serve the maintenance of that culture, unless we develop the anthropological insights to move beyond.