

**U.S. Mass Media, American Public Opinion and  
the Kosovo War: Insinuating Belligerence or  
Soothing Political Tension?**

**وسائل الإعلام الأمريكية، الرأي العام الأمريكي وحرب كوسوفو:  
تلميح إلى العداوة أم تهدئة للتوتر السياسي؟**

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**Abstract:**

The atrocities committed by the Serbian president Slobodan Milošević's regime during the Kosovo War in the late 1990s prompted the U.S. to launch a NATO humanitarian intervention there even without the U.N. approval. That mission was coined the name Operation Allied Force. The U.S. mass media was, like it has constantly been, present during all the phases of this crisis. As it is claimed, news coverage has always something to do with shaping the American public opinion on foreign affairs and thus the politicians' decision making might be influenced too. Therefore, this paper primarily focuses on one side of the communication process which is concerned with the American audience's interpretation of that conflict's news.

Additionally, this piece of research tends to study this mutually entangled influence to ultimately reach a conclusion on whether the American mass media was insinuating belligerence or tending to sooth the political tension during the Balkan crisis. In this process, the descriptive and the historical methods are used through reviewing previous relevant field research, articles and studies that

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dealt with the American mass media's coverage of the Kosovo War and its impact on both the U.S. public and political policymakers.

**Keywords:** U.S. foreign policy; Kosovo War; NATO airstrikes; mass media; public opinion.

#### ملخص:

في أواخر تسعينيات القرن الماضي، دفعت الجرائم التي ارتكبتها نظام الرئيس الصربي سلوبودان ميلوسيفيتش خلال حرب كوسوفو الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية إلى تنظيم تدخل إنساني لحلف شمال الأطلسي هناك دون موافقة الأمم المتحدة حيث أطلق عليه اسم عملية القوة المتحالفة. وكانت وسائل الإعلام الأمريكية، كما هو حالها دوماً، حاضرة خلال جميع مراحل هذه الأزمة مرسخة الاعتقاد السائد حول دورها في تشكيل الرأي العام الأمريكي حول مسائل القضايا الخارجية، وبالتالي تأثيرها على صنع القرار السياسي أيضاً. لذلك، يركز هذا المقال بشكل أساسي على جانب واحد من مكونات عملية الاتصال والذي يهتم بطريقة تفسير الجمهور الأمريكي لأخبار هذا الصراع. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، يعمل هذا البحث على دراسة هذا التأثير المتداخل للوصول في الأخير إلى نتيجة حول ما إذا كانت وسائل الإعلام الأمريكية قد لمحت إلى العدوانية أو ساهمت في تهدئة التوتر السياسي أثناء أزمة البلقان. في هذا الصدد، تم استخدام المنهجين الوصفي والتاريخي في هذه الورقة البحثية من خلال مراجعة الأبحاث الميدانية السابقة ذات الصلة والمقالات والدراسات التي تناولت تغطية وسائل الإعلام الأمريكية لحرب كوسوفو وتأثيرها على كل من الجمهور الأمريكي وصانعي القرار السياسي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** السياسة الخارجية للولايات المتحدة الأمريكية، حرب كوسوفو، غارات الناتو الجوية، وسائل الإعلام، الرأي العام.

#### Introduction

The social media coverage of the recent events of the Russian conflict with Ukraine drew attention to the previous methods used in reporting the news and its impact on public activism. Though the Kosovo War was seen as one of the pioneering examples of a cyberwar in the world (Rizanaj, 2018), the way journalists covered the two wars' incidents and how people reacted to them were different.

In any case, prior to the colossal proliferation of using social media for different purposes, mass media was the mover and shaker when it

comes to exhibiting opinions on certain issues, the U.S.'s is of no exception. It has always played a role in introducing certain topics to its audience, define them and even shape and forge the audience's opinions and viewpoints on them.

The aim of conducting this study is to review and search for the impact of the U.S. mass media in shaping the American public opinion on foreign policy issues. The Kosovo crisis was not a first-hand experience to the American public. Therefore, the perceptions and viewpoints on what was happening there depended on how journalists reported and communicated its events.

### **Mass Media Reports and Policy-Making**

The freedom of press is one of the rights guaranteed and legally protected by the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution. With such a privilege, it is largely presumed that mass media exercises a great influence on public opinion. Moreover, the political policy-making in the U.S. government, like many democratic countries in the world, is influenced by many factors, most importantly media and public opinion. Due to this fact, the American public's access to the political life is a prevailing matter.

In general, mass media refers to the communication means that publicly convey messages that can reach an abundant number of people simultaneously. The term covers television, radio, newspapers, books, magazines, posters, the cinema, and even videos and computers (internet most recently). Even though newspapers and the radio are regarded as old technologies, their significance is yet persistent among the U.S. media as studies revealed that 80 per cent of adult Americans read newspapers on a regular basis (Watts, 2010). Mass media, simply stated, is whatever modality transferring the information to the audience. However, the role that the media plays in shaping public opinion on notably foreign policy issues is still subject of discussion and research. This important role depends on different factors such as the setting, situation and circumstances on which journalists are reporting the news on. In the case of conflict settings, the role of media "may be too often underestimated. Indeed, the media has great potential to either incite or calm societal tensions" (Laplante and Phenicie, 2010, as cited in Gashi, 2021, p. 109). Many critics affirm the crucial role of the media in wars but they limit it to humanitarian matters. News coverage and reports might be considered a double-edged weapon especially in such cases of humanitarian crisis like that of Kosovo. Journalistic reports can be both constructive as they help settling down the strife or destructive when flaring up the tension. Besides this role, war coverage has some effects including the

acceleration of the political decision-making, the prevention of achieving policy goals and an agenda-building process within the political decision-making system (Eilders, 2005). Objectivity in such kind of war reports might be questioned at times depending on its purpose and what importance the story might add. What makes certain stories and events newsworthy are some selected criteria such as novelty, presence of violence, conflict, disaster or scandal, familiarity and people's availability to interview (Gitelson, Dudley, & Dubnick, 2011). Therefore, the case of the war in Kosovo fulfilled most of the criteria that were previously stated. Still, being for real a newsworthy conflict or not is inquired here in this piece of research.

Many governments questioned the legitimacy of this pioneering NATO military interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign country especially since it was launched without the consent of the United Nations. To justify this, NATO also declared a propaganda war (Ke, 2008). But first, what would the expression "propaganda war" mean? The author Avdyl Gashi from the department of sociology at the University of Pristina, Kosovo, asserted in his 2021 article that one of the main forms that characterizes information during conflict periods is media propaganda. Expressly, the term propaganda has always been connotated negatively regardless of some attempts in literature to neutralize it. It was used during the World Wars to expatiate on the enemy's opinion forming activities that are mostly composed of lies. Consequently, the propaganda discourse is perceived as being firstly unethical as it deceives and manipulates a mass audience and secondly illogical as it is built on emotional and crowd-pleasing discussion rather than evident and rational one (Marlin, 1989, as cited in Walton, 1997). In other words, in order to please the audience with satisfactory stories, journalists and reporters, in some cases, deviate from respecting the ethics and standards of journalism and as a consequence they engage in a propaganda.

With regard to the journalism situation in Kosovo and its importance in divulging the reality of what was happening in the country to the whole world, during the pre-war period and all over the country, there was only one daily newspaper given the name "Rilindja" and one TV channel named "Radiotelevizioni i Prishtinës". Under the Milosevic regime, not only these information sources were shut down but also the Albanian journalists were persecuted. For this reason, this period was called a blocking period of information where the Kosovo Albanians get informed only by foreign mass media. Howbeit, during the war, there were attempts by the Albanian diaspora to fund broadcasts on the Albanian Radio Television (RTSH) that already aired some parts for free. Into the bargain, in 1997, the

independent daily newspaper “Koha Ditore” was first published and in 1998, two information institutions “Radio Kosova e Lirë” and the news agency “Kosova press” were established by the Kosovo Liberation Army. Ultimately, in 1999, broadcasts on a radio station started to inform the public about the war progression (Gashi, 2021). There was a sort of strangle on the Kosovar media mainly because of this institution’s importance in illuminating the public opinion and thus the decision making of certain issues would be influenced on its turn. Further, influenced by the European and international mainstream public spheres discourses of war on terrorism and crime, the local newspapers in the post-conflict period legitimized the Serbian nationalism and framed the Serbs as victims of the Kosovo Albanians. The U.S. media’s use of antiterrorism discourse had a great impact on the Serbian newspapers’ language (Erjavec & Volčič, 2007). Hence, what the Serbian newspapers have been inciting, impacted the situation in Kosovo in a great degree. Owing to this, the Kosovar journalists were not able to provide the media in the world with the proper image of their country’s war ordeal. As for the U.S. mass media, referencing their stories from the Kosovar part was never adequate.

Mass media, in general, is an important factor that influences the policy-making in the American government both directly and indirectly. This indirect impact is represented through forging the public opinion on certain issues. If the media itself do not have enough reliable and distinctive resources, how would it help in the process of formulating a solid-based public opinion?

### **Public Opinion Forging**

A commonly admitted fact is that the U.S. citizens play a crucial role in displaying their viewpoints and opinions on different issues regarding their country’s politics. It has always been reported that a main notion in modern democracy is the public participation and activism. Ergo, the public may, in different manners, influence the government decisions. By the same token, the public itself may be influenced by other factors such as the media. The news spread on TV, radio, newspapers and nowadays social media platforms participate to a great degree in shaping public opinion about decision-making and even the decision-makers. This is the same in periods of crisis as prior studies confirmed that in wartime periods, politicians and military executives become popular and trustworthy due to media coverage’s support of these figures and events. Yet, this public support lasts only for few months before its ultimate decline (Eilders,

2005), depending mainly on how the public discourse on that matter was communicated.

There exist two views concerning public discourse. The first prevails that, in a democracy, public activism is ought to decide on political issues. Public discourse is composed of principles of logical reasoning and rules of evidence. Not only this, it must be useful in mass communication in a way to convince the mass audience of the politicians' views. On the other hand, some skeptics of this perspective accuse it of being hopelessly optimistic. Their argument for their view is that the mass audience cannot be influenced by logical reasoning as they get impressed by ornamented images and stories (Rawls, 1993, Le Bon, 1896, as cited in Walton, 1997). For these reasons, it is difficult to decide how to influence the crowd reading, watching or listening to certain speeches and stories.

In the United States of America, there are some agents of political socialization that participate in forging the Americans' opinions at a young age about their government and politics among which are family and friends, school, religion, political culture and the media (Gitelson, Dudley, & Dubnick, 2011). Nevertheless, contrary to imagination, it is hard to assess the effects of mass media on popular attitudes. As a result, four theories about media's effects on the attitudes and conduct of people were speculated. The Hypodermic Theory compared people's news grasp to a sponge absorbing water. Yet, a propaganda's effect in a liberal democracy like the U.S.A. is way lesser than in a totalitarian regime. The Reinforcement Theory affirmed that the audience exposure to certain news is not arbitrary (Selective Exposure Theory) as they choose to be communicated with what goes with their already constructed beliefs. Contrary to that and as far as the Agenda-setting Theory is concerned, it is the media that acquaints the public with what to think about by guiding them towards what they should see, read and accept as the only truth. The fourth and last theory is the Independent Effect Theory. It confirms that the media still has a growing effect on public attitude despite the hardship of assessing this effect (Watts, 2010). A common point that links these diverse theories is that mass media impacts its audience differently. Not only this, other scholars even attributed an effect to the American multinational Cable News Network (CNN) called "the CNN effect". One of its effects is the agenda-setting effect that can prioritize an issue over another creating what is called opinion saliency and thus propel policy makers to tackle it first and foremost. Other subaltern effects are the accelerant, the impediment, the propaganda, and the challenging effects. The 24-hour media coverage of even distant countries' events catalyzes the public to put pressure over the

government to set decisions in favor of their stance (Bahador, 2007, as cited in Rizanaj, 2018). This happened with many instances of the U.S. wars where the American citizens rolled the dice on the politics of their country as they had a say in the crucial decision-making of these incidents.

In order to fulfill the task of being an active citizen, the media is supposed to make the war subject to democratic control through enabling the citizens' political evaluation of its events. To reach and orientate the public, journalists are expected not only to transfer these events as they are but to broadly interpret and assess them. Likewise, the media must draw the public attention to certain wars by focusing on their critical incidents (Eilders, 2005). Nonetheless, the media blackout that was exercised by the Serbian government over the Kosovar mass media took part, in a way, to prevent the U.S. media from reporting the real casualties and atrocities that happened in that country. For this, the American public were not fully acquainted with the war calamities during the Balkan crisis.

From another perspective, the blocking period of information in Kosovo was not the only reason that hindered the truth from outreaching the entire world. Among different reasons, other institutions participated in this blackout. For instance, as in the U.S., the CNN aired programs and the timing division were carefully chosen by the U.S. military to be in favor of the NATO's humanitarian intervention in the internal affairs of a sovereign country (Rizanaj, 2018). To wit, owing to this, not all the war mishaps got to the reach of the American citizens and thus a forthright opinion was not properly formulated. This was proven through conducting polls to enquire the U.S. public's stance on the whole issue of this American intervention. The authors Alan R. Gitelson, Robert L. Dudley, and Melvin J. Dubnick (2011) avouched that in spite of the fact that public opinion polls might be at times polarized which makes it really hard for the American Congress to make decisions that please a portion over another, their role in making policy and politics in the U.S.A. is undeniable. These polls are primarily conducted to assess how knowledgeable and militant are the public concerning certain issues. But, what about the U.S. intervention in the Kosovo War?

### **A Marginalized Case**

The agony for the stricken nations is relatively indiscernible. Notwithstanding, the momentousness of the reported events and issues in the media is dissimilar. To put it in another way, the American mass media, unfortunately, do not provide events equal attention and coverage. Among the reasons for this are the conducts of the

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international politics and the media. They are the ones that qualify people as being worthy victims or not contrary to the moral ideals of the humanitarian organizations (Höijer et al., 2002). Interests always tip the scales especially in politics and by that, the newsworthiness of events and stories is drastically relative.

Many Americans hold a belief that public opinion is affected by their media. Some assume that this is just a myth as some conducted research confirmed that the media failed to forge people's already constructed beliefs due to the public's selective exposure except for those who do not hold firm beliefs on certain issues. Besides, media influences people the most when the event or story is not familiar to the public or they cannot have direct exposure to it. Anyways, one of media's effects on the public is what is called Political Media Priming Process where the media chooses what to expose to the audience as newsworthy and what to ignore (Gitelson, Dudley, & Dubnick, 2011). Accordingly, somehow, the Kosovo War was subjected to this process as it was in a way marginalized as compared to other covered wars and contemporaneous domestic events.

The German researcher in political communication at the Hans Bredow Institute for Media Research, Christiane Eilders (2005), emphasized the consequences of the selectivity in war coverage in spite of the fact of not being able to cover all the wars at once. In all the ways, mass media's ultimate purpose is to contribute in the process of peacemaking no matter how. However, as the researcher added, it is argued that the media is not autonomous as it tends to be pro-parliamentary consensus. This mechanism is known as the Indexing Theory which speculates that the media coverage of wars is corresponding the views of the parliament (the Congress in the case of the U.S.). Moreover, public opinion on any war becomes crucial because modern wars are waged with the support of the public. This supporting public opinion is expressed, produced and regulated through the media and with exercising a control over the media, the general public opinion might be forged.

Speaking about the case of the Kosovo War, the journalist Robert Fisk from "The Independent" newspaper pointed to the idea that two types of journalists reported on this war, the frothers and the sheep. The frothers were basically journalists whose reports were biased and predictable because they were self-convinced by the rightfulness of their side and the malignity of the other. Whereas, the sheep were those journalists who blindly followed the NATO's lead (Knightley, 2000, as cited in Höijer et al., 2002) even if the integrity of the incident is questioned. Nevertheless, both types of journalists, frothers or sheep, were not able, in most cases, to step away from bias.



As it has been previously stated, the U.S. military had sometimes a hand in the journalistic reports on the Kosovo War. On that account, the American wartime communication strategy shifted from the public diplomacy's foreign policy measures towards military-based information operations. As a result, under the Information Doctrine of 1998, the U.S. army considered information a discrete military feature of high importance. The objectives behind this are the legitimization, deterrence and camouflage. In order to achieve such objectives, different strategies were utilized such as using the mass media in forms of embedded journalism, media campaigns on military issues and building military TV stations (Eilders, 2005). Accordingly, different studies on different U.S. mass media platforms were undertaken in order to understand their conduct before and after engaging in the conflict. So, one of these studies was conducted on four major American networks (ABC, CBS, NBC and CNN). The study confirmed the CNN effect on setting the agenda as the coverage of certain massacres was one of the factors that led to the NATO's military intervention in Kosovo (Bahador, 2007, as cited in Rizanaj, 2018). According to this, attention is brought to the fact that military decisions and the media in the Kosovo case had a reciprocal impact. Plus, conforming to the study stated right above, the U.S. mass media directly affected the governmental decision of participating in the airstrike without the consistent need of a public opinion on the matter. The American public did not truly, in any way, exclude themselves from being part of making the airstrike participation decision. In fact, among the reasons that made people indifferent and less interested about the war in Kosovo as a whole were that the Balkan peninsula's situation and the ethnic conflicts were difficult to understand and the media was not able to transmit their agony (Höijer et al., 2002). The mass media, in this case, is to blame.

From the same angle, in a span of one week (from 22 to 28 April 1999), the associate professor of international communication at the University of Hawaii Richard Vincent conducted a study on nine different news media. He reached a conclusion that reporting on Kosovo and the NATO intervention there was selective, one-sided as it lacked important themes, limited and even biased (Vincent, 2000). This study confirms the previously stated denunciation of the nonfulfillment of the basic role of the media that is to transmit and interpret the overall information in an objective manner. Yet, most importantly, media must not be bound to the restrictive rules that governments might enact. Indeed, different governments, including the U.S., and the NATO tried to influence how the media expatiated on the Kosovo crisis. Journalists from different countries relied more

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on the NATO spokesmen in their reports because they were manipulative and not liars as compared to the Serbs who tended to lie to reach their goals. Furthermore, most of the journalists from the NATO countries were expelled from Kosovo and Serbia at the beginning, but later loose censorship was exercised (Höijer et al., 2002). These notions made media reports and coverage of the same events different. As an example, comparing the Chinese media reports on the war in Kosovo to those of the U.S. media, the researcher Jin Yang found that the Chinese newspapers tended to frame the NATO airstrikes as an intervention of Yugoslavia's sovereignty whereas the American newspapers framed those airstrikes as humanitarian help to save the Albanians from the Serbian ethnic cleansing (Yang, 2003, as cited in Rizanaj, 2018).

To have a clear idea on the way Kosovo War was communicated in the U.S. mass media, the scholar Jing Ke had an initiative to conduct a study that tackles the issue. Prior to his research, only one study carried by the researchers Audrey Lustgarten and François Debrix about the western media reports on the Kosovo War and the U.S. led humanitarian intervention there that they were conducted quantitatively and thus these studies tend to be more objective than the qualitative ones. Unlike Lustgarten and Debrix's paper that focused on CNN reports and to a lesser degree the BBC and New York Times, Jing Ke relied in his study on the U.S. written press precisely The Washington Post and The Washington Times. The study concluded that no clear political slant was presented by these two U.S. newspapers even if The Post was more neutral than The Times. Yet, hiding or neglecting but not distorting some facts related to the Kosovo crisis was prevailing which confirms that news cannot reflect reality in an objective manner. However, the blame was not only put on the journalists as themselves might be misled and framed (Ke, 2008). This is a confirmation to what has been previously discussed about the NATO, U.S. military, governments and other factors that take part in influencing the media.

To sum up, between blaming and vindicating the media's stance in dealing with the Kosovo War, still this case is seen as being journalistically lightweight. Consequently, forging the U.S. public opinion on this issue was not a facile task. As it has been previously argued in this paper, Americans were not exceedingly acquainted with the case of the war in Kosovo mainly because they were not well-informed by the media. Owing to this, formulating a stance worth militance was unattainable. In spite of that and in an attempt to assess the American public opinion concerning the whole issue of the war in Kosovo and the NATO airstrikes against Serbia, experts from the Pew

Research Center conducted all along the year of the conflict several polls. One of these public opinion polls was a survey based on telephone interviews directed by the Princeton Survey Research Associates towards a nationwide sample of 18 and over 1179 adults in a period from 12<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> May, 1999. The findings of such a survey proclaimed a dwindle in the American public's support of the war and all the decisions and issues that revolve around it. In addition, the same public's interest in following the news coverage about the conflict diminished too, especially as compared to other news coverage of domestic incidents (Pew Research Center, 1999).

Table N° 1 :

Now I will read a list of some stories covered by news organizations this past month. As I read each item, tell me if you happened to follow this news story very closely, fairly closely, not too closely, or not at all closely?  
[INSERT ITEM; ROTATE ITEMS BUT ALWAYS ASK "e" LAST]

	Very Closely	Fairly Closely	Not too Closely	Not at all Closely	DK/ Ref
a. NATO air strikes against Serbian forces	32	38	19	10	1=100
Late April, 1999	41	39	13	7	*=100
April, 1999	41	37	16	6	0=100
March, 1999 <sup>1</sup>	43	32	15	9	1=100
February, 1999 <sup>2</sup>	11	30	28	30	1=100
Mid-January, 1999 <sup>3</sup>	9	21	24	44	2=100
March, 1998 <sup>4</sup>	5	12	26	55	2=100
b. The bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by a NATO warplane	24	33	25	17	1=100
c. The events following the shooting of students and teachers at a Colorado high school	59	31	7	2	1=100
Late April, 1999 <sup>5</sup>	68	24	6	2	*=100
d. Tornadoes in Oklahoma and Kansas	38	40	15	6	1=100
ALWAYS ASK "e" LAST: Accusations that China stole nuclear technology from U.S. laboratories	18	24	24	31	3=100
March, 1999	19	24	24	32	1=100

**ARHS**                      **VOL:**                      **N : month and year**

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Source : Adapted from Pew Research Center, Washington D.C., 1999, p. 14. Copyright 2022 by Pew Research Center.

The table right above was chosen amongst others to confirm the point of view presented in this piece of research. Yet, it is worth mentioning that the Americans were not totally indifferent from the beginning but they lost interest in the issue over time. Not having a strong opinion about an affair means that the strong influence the public generally have on the government will be equivocal.

## CONCLUSION

The 1964 Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting winning journalist and historian David Halberstam revolutionized the media war reporting when he divulged unfamiliar war stories to the public. In his book “The Best and the Brightest”, he depicted the Johnson-administration officials as the warmongers during the Vietnam War as compared to the legitimate nationalist revolution of the Vietcong. In a way, this might have opened the eyes of the American officials to be cautious in their future wars and their media coverage. In the same regard, in his 2002 book entitled “War in a Time of Peace. Bush, Clinton and the Generals”, Halberstam laid the blame on President Clinton for focusing on economy and domestic issues on the expense of foreign affairs (Heilbrunn, 2015). This accentuates the previously tackled factors participating in the marginalization of the Kosovo War’s media coverage and the reaction of the American public to its events .

Accordingly, the reciprocal relation between the U.S mass media, the U.S. public opinion and the U.S. political decision-making can be seen as a vicious circle. As much as the mass media can influence the U.S. public opinion that influences the governmental decisions on its turn, the mass media itself can be influenced by the government leaders or the public. The current study is an attempt to tackle the impact of the American mass media on shaping the American public opinion on the war in Kosovo. Hence, it deals solely with the feedback stage of the communication process represented by the U.S. audience’s interpretation of the Kosovo crisis. Findings asserted that the American public was indifferent and even the small proportion that was following this war’s news, gradually lost interest in it. This fact was owing to the laxity in the U.S. media’s coverage of the war in Kosovo that was practically neither insinuating belligerence nor soothing the political tension accompanying the affair.



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