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Citizenship Education and Conflict Management"**

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**Workshop**  
**"Enlightenment or propaganda tool?  
Conflicts and the role of the media"**

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Journalism is not just the first draft of history, as famously noted by American publisher Phil Graham, but has also become a part of the creation of that history. Shifting events in this or that direction. This is to a huge extent primarily the result of the technological advances, which the XX century brought with it. In the 1850s for example, during one of the first wars, which was documented and reported properly, the Crimean War, it took newspaper reports anything between 5 and 20 days to reach London. In contrast, the end of the XX century brought us live coverage of wars with instant reports starting in the pre-war phase and giving us live pictures as it breaks out, TV feeds from Tomahawk missiles as they scream down onto the targets. The First Gulf War, the wars in the former Yugoslavia, then Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, the list of wars we follow instantly today is, unfortunately, endless.

One would have thought that this would also mean a greater clarity, understanding and adherence to facts. But as Julian Barnes famously notes: "The history that happens underneath our noses ought to be the clearest, and yet it's the most deliquescent (easy to melt or dissolve, in other words, unstable, not firm, solid or clear)<sup>1</sup>". The reasons for this phenomenon are many, from ignorance and lack of understanding of a pre conflict or conflict situation, all the way to direct purchase of influence with a thousand shades of grey in-between.

"The first casualty when war comes is truth" said US Senator Hiram Johnson in 1917. In 1991, the giant among the print media, the British political weekly "The Economist", which is considered a "must read" for politicians and businessmen around the world, argued that it was "right to suspend the normal play of democratic argument. The truth about the Gulf War must await the end of the fighting." And this from the beacon of free speech in the oldest democracy in the world!?! During the First World War, British Prime Minister Lloyd George said: "If people really knew (the truth), the war would be stopped tomorrow. But of course they don't know and can't know<sup>2</sup>."

Certainly, truth and accuracy are not the same, accuracy being more precise and "truth" more subject to change depending on the eye of the beholder and time elapsed. And it is not just the modern times that have turned real wars into information and misinformation wars. The massive media campaign which preceded the Second Gulf War, persuading the

<sup>1</sup> Julian Barnes "The Sense of an Ending", published by Julian Cape, 2011, London

<sup>2</sup> Talking to the editor of the "Manchester Guardian", Charles Prestwich Scott.

American public that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and that a war was just and necessary, is just a recent in a long line of examples of how the truth is twisted to justify a cause. As an old cynical axiom among journalists says : “Never let the truth get in the way of a good story.”

The first recorded and documented example of purchase of influence go back to the American Civil War, when the Confederate side sent an emissary to London who sent back a detailed list of journalists he bought including the receipts for the payments<sup>3</sup>. Other infamous examples include publisher Randolph Hurst’s telegram to artist Frederic Remington who wanted to return to the US saying that there will be no war in Cuba in 1898. Hearst responded "Please remain. You furnish the pictures and I'll furnish the war." We do not have a copy of this telegram, but the story is believed to be true. Or, a more recent example, the “Kuwaiti babies” story from October 1990. In the run-up to the First Gulf War, it was reported that upon occupying Kuwait, Iraqi soldiers had run amok in a hospital, taking babies out of incubators and stealing the expensive medical appliances, leaving the babies to die on the cold cement floor. The story blossomed on 10 October 1990 following the testimony in Congress by a 15-year-old eyewitness who was identified just as Nayirah. Her testimony did not leave a single eye dry and quite likely affected Congress’ decision to authorise President Bush to use military force in support of “UNSC Resolution 678”.

Great story! It has all the elements journalism requires including a great emotional impact, which has in the meantime become de rigueur for war reporting. Her testimony was quoted by President Bush and even by the United Nations. It has but one single flaw – it is not true. It transpired later that “Nayirah” had not seen what she said she had seen, that she had not been anywhere near Kuwait at the time, that she was in fact the daughter of the Kuwaiti Ambassador to the U.S.! Immediately after the invasion by Saddam’s troops, Kuwait had hired a PR giant, Hill and Knowlton, who conjured up the story and trained “Nayirah” for her Congressional stage debut.

The public at large always prefers simple stories, and in my reporting career I must have heard editors tell me, “too complicated, KISS<sup>4</sup> it”, hundreds of times. Simple, in war reporting, basically means that we need to have the good guys and we need to have the bad guys. Grey areas are complicated and take up too many square inches or broadcasting minutes to explain. Once things are simple, it is but a small step to demonising one side in the conflict. And when it comes to reporting in the countries that are parties to the conflict, it is not even a case of simplifying for the sake of economy, but of twisting reality to fit the war propaganda needs.

Going back to the American Civil War again, if we look at either Confederate or Union newspapers of the time, we can see that, for example, a Confederate soldier was not “killed in battle”, but was “sacrificed to the devilish ambitions of his implacable masters, Davis and Lee.” We read that “Confederate women had necklaces made from Yankee eyes” while “unholy Northerners used heads of Confederate soldiers for footballs.” It is almost amazing how the iconography and vocabulary have not changed. Even as the battles were just beginning in 1991, both Serbian and Croatian media widely told the same stories and used exactly the same phrases as their American counterparts a century and a half ago.

<sup>3</sup> Journalist Henry Hotze, a Swiss national working for the “Register” newspaper from Alabama, was sent to Britain with funds to suborn British journalists. He reports in his letters (published in his diary) that he was able to find “seven London journalists willing to place news items and even editorials favourable to the Southern cause in return for payments...”. Ephraim Douglas Adams, “Great Britain and the American Civil War”. Xx: xx, p.154.

<sup>4</sup> KISS – Keep It Simple and Stupid. Or, more generously, Keep It Short and Simple. On the Western side of the Atlantic, KISS is interpreted as “Keep it Simple, Stupid”, emphasising that “stupid” is the person who does not understand the necessity of keeping things simple.

On top of warmongering clichés, we live in the era of PR enterprise and spin. While the creation of illusions used to be a government or media owners' prerogative, the last three decades have seen a surreal proliferation of spin-doctors and PR agencies, making the masters of this "art" some of the most influential people in the world. Alastair Campbell's<sup>5</sup> three-part autobiography is a picture-perfect example of the influence, arrogance and ruthlessness of today's spin-doctors. Campbell is attributed with creating a decisive change in NATO's media campaign during the 1999 Kosovo War and even left Tony Blair's side to spend time in Brussels to run that part of the war.

Next on the list of problems, which make the media more, a propaganda tool than one for enlightenment is the quality and knowledge of journalists who cover wars. There is nothing special about journalists, they come in the same shapes and sizes as people in any other profession; there are good ones, bad ones and mediocre ones, just like with surgeons, lawyers or plumbers. But war reporting is a specialised genre, which has always been extremely attractive as a shortcut to fame and possibly fortune; and a great magnet for the adventurously minded. A typical example is Anthony Loyd, whose autobiography "My war gone by, I miss it so"<sup>6</sup> tells the story of how he arrived in Bosnia without a penny in his pocket or a media outlet he could report for. Nevertheless, he first became a photographer, then reporter and ended up as a full-blown correspondent for the London Times. Through its amazingly frank cynicism, this book is a rarity among journalists' memoirs and paints the attitude towards war, truth and profession in anything but complimentary colours.

All of the above add up to what is often an uncritical and unethical approach to journalism, which is almost always present in conflict situations. The public wants, or the editors believe that the public wants – a black and white picture. A "good guys vs. bad guys" story and most often than not that is exactly what they provide. Looking currently at the events in the Ukraine, we can once again see (when comparing for example coverage by CNN and Russia Today) an almost total absence of the numerous shades of grey, which are inevitably present in any conflict. More often than not, the media **are** a propaganda tool and while this kind of "journalism" is completely unacceptable it has become a standard rather than an exception. It will probably never be eradicated, but through civic education we can try and make it less present in our lives. We cannot change the way that journalists and media report, but via civic education, we can make the viewers/listeners/readers at least much more critical and open-minded "consumers" of the media.

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<sup>5</sup> The PR wizard behind former British Prime Minister Tony Blair's election and war campaigns.

<sup>6</sup> An excellent review of this book can be found at <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/03/26/reviews/000326.26finnigt.html>