
Mass Media and Collective Violence

JOSIP ŽUPANOV

Professor emeritus, Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts

Summary

Like other landmark historic events, the war on the territory of the former Yugoslavia has been explained by three types of theories: mythological, scientific and common-sensical, the latter making use of certain pseudoscientific arguments. The author claims that the theory blaming the media in all six republics of the former Yugoslavia for the outbreak of the war belongs to the latter type. The empirical data gathered on the eve of the war show that ethnic tolerance was highest in the republics which were later struck by the war: Bosnia and Hercegovina and Croatia. The author provides an alternative explanation of the role of the media in paving the way for the war. Only in Serbia did mass media, in the circumstances of the prevailing authoritarian orientation of the population before the war, serve to the aggressive nationalist leadership for political mobilization, which aroused in the Serbian people a feeling of imperilment and a sense of omnipotence. After the outbreak of the war in Croatia and Bosnia and Hercegovina, the media have been only one of the elements in an ever-expanding spiral of hatred and violence.

The speech on the collapse of Yugoslavia might begin with a proverb: "One death, a hundred prophets!" This piece of common wisdom points to the deeply ingrained human need to "explain away" everything that has happened, to give events a meaning, a purpose. Thus each *smutnoe vreme* is accompanied by a flood of various "theories". All of them can be divided into three categories: (1) mythological explanations that attribute the events to "evil forces"; (2) social-scientific explanations i.e. attempts to explain the events by invoking the existing scientifically based theories or, in case the existing theories prove inadequate, to make up new ones; (3) between these two extremes there is a plethora of "plausible" theories which can lay claim to the scientific status but are really commonsensical solutions corroborated by *ad hoc* arguments.

The purpose of this paper is not to delve deeply into these theories. We shall mention just in passing that the first category includes various theories about the international conspiracies, very popular in Serbia ("masonic-Comintern-Vatican conspiracy against the entire Serbian people") but are nothing less popular in Croatia (international anticroatian conspiracy) or in Bosnia-Hercegovina (international antiislamic conspiracy). The conspiracy theories are a modernized version of the belief of "primitive"

tribes that the world is ruled by demons and evil magic. Such beliefs are not completely alien to the supermodern countries of the West: suffice is to remember that for the Western world the Soviet Union was the “evil empire”, as dubbed by President Reagan.

The illustration for the second category is the recent revision of the classic theory of modernization according to which the Balkan hell could not have been foreseen, so an alternative theory — that of interethnic competition for resources — was used. That theory had existed for some time, though in a somewhat different context (Hodson, Sekulić, Massey, 1994).

From the third, biggest category, only one theory will be singled out: the one that directly attributes outbreaks of violence to mass media “controlled by nationalist leaders” (Thompson 1994). Though superficially it is based on facts, it has in fact been a spin-off of a “higher order” theory: the “equal guilt theory” which is in fact an “article of faith” but which poses as a paradigm of Kuhn’s “normal” science (Popović 1994).

How to approach these theories? It is easiest to dismiss the mythological explanations. There is no need to check whether such explanations are right or wrong, as there is no sense in disputing the beliefs of Hopi Indians that the ritual rain dance may actually bring rain. Though the belief that the rain dance can influence the motion of cyclones may seem meteorologically preposterous, it does not mean that it is sociologically pointless. As Robert K. Merton pointed out, that ritual is important for strengthening the cohesion of the social group in question and that this is its “latent function” (Merton 1957). Thus mythological and even mythomaniac theories should be looked at from the point of view of their primarily latent function which they have for the conflicting parties.

Regarding scientific theories, they should be discussed by social scientists at professional meetings and in specialized publications. In science this is “business as usual”.

However, it is unclear how to approach the plausible (commonsensical) theories. Should they be subjected to the same treatment like the “true” scientific theories or should only their functions be investigated? I would suggest a two-phase procedure: in the first phase they should be subjected to a rigorous (empirical) test. If they do not pass this test (as most likely they will not) then, in the second phase, they should be subjected to a functional analysis. Further in the text I am going to apply the procedure to the theory about the media as instigators of violence but will limit myself to the first phase only, i.e. to the empirical test of this theory.

Formulating and testing the theory

In order to test this theory we must come up with a more precise definition. Strictly speaking this is not a formal theory but an interpretative model of the "Balkan crisis". It may be defined as a system consisting of two propositions and two implicit assumptions.

Proposition I: media production and dissemination of negative images about other national and ethnic groups will certainly provoke in the recipients a high degree of intolerance and hatred towards those groups.

Proposition II: a high degree of intolerance and hatred will certainly result in collective violence among these groups.

The first implicit assumption: all the media in the former Yugoslavia in equal measure fabricated and disseminated the messages of intolerance and hatred, and the national media of the newly independent states are doing it today.

The second implicit assumption: the recipients of the messages were exposed only to the influence of national (republic) media.

Of course, both of these assumptions are grossly incorrect. Nevertheless, I suggest that we accept them or temporarily abstract from a remarkable range of "virulence" of individual national media as well as from the countereffects that the media from one republic produced in other republics. Namely, to distinguish among the different levels of the intensity of propaganda and the countereffects (even if we had empirical data for the quantification of those variables which we do not) would only unnecessarily complicate the analysis without affecting its results.

Table 1: National tolerance in the former Yugoslavia

Republic/province	Index of tolerance
Bosnia-Herzegovina	3.88
Voivodina	3.83
Croatia	3.63
Montenegro	3.45
Serbia	3.28
Slovenia	2.67
Macedonia	2.53
Kosovo	1.71
Average	3.28

Source: R. Hodson, D. Sekulić, G. Massey, "National Tolerance in the Former Yugoslavia", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 99, No. 6, (May 1994).

In testing the mentioned propositions, I will use the indexes of national tolerance which D. Sekulić calculated on the basis of the empirical data from one survey conducted on the territory of ex-Yugoslavia at the end of 1989 and the beginning of 1990. Results are shown in Table 1.

If, in accordance with Proposition I we assume that the media propaganda was the sole factor that created national intolerance, then the findings lead us to the conclusion that mass media succeeded in creating intolerance only in the peripheral units of the Yugoslav federation. In the central republics (where the fiercest conflicts have occurred), the degree of tolerance was above the statistical average (in Bosnia and Hercegovina rather high — near 4.0). In other words, contrary to Proposition I, “the critical mass” of intolerance for the outbreak of an open conflict did not exist.

Another problem with this proposition was how to explain the big variations among certain republics/provinces despite the same intensity of the media propaganda. Obviously, some other factor was at work here which modified the effects of the media propaganda. Indeed, the authors of the above study mentioned that factor: it is the national (ethnic) and cultural diversity or, popularly called, multiculturalism. They worked out the diversity indexes (which range from 0 to 1). Let us have a look at the results.

Table 2: National and cultural diversity in the former Yugoslavia

Republic/province	Diversity index
Bosnia-Hercegovina	.64
Voivodina	.61
Croatia	.45
Montenegro	.45
Serbia	.27
Slovenia	.19
Macedonia	.41
Kosovo	.39

Source: Hodson, Sekulić, Massey, *op.cit.*

A comparison between the index of tolerance and the index of diversity shows a positive correlation: the greater the diversity, the bigger national tolerance. Or, in other words, nationally more homogeneous communities are more receptive to intolerant media messages than less homogeneous ones. But this correlation does not hold for Kosovo and Macedonia: there some other factors were at work about which the polling

data give no clue. In short, Proposition I cannot be accepted unconditionally; it requires, to say the least, a substantial qualification.

Things are much worse with Proposition II. For example, had we known the tolerance indexes in the first half of 1990 (which, naturally, was not technically possible) we might have predicted the following: (1) armed conflicts and open violence are not likely to occur in Yugoslavia in the foreseeable future; (2) if, nevertheless, they do occur, it is most probably going to happen on Kosovo, in Macedonia and Slovenia, less probably in Croatia, and least probably in Bosnia-Hercegovina. The following events gave lie to these predictions: war and violence on a massive scale broke out in Croatia and peaked in Bosnia-Hercegovina. As we can see, Proposition II was thus completely contravened: neither did intolerance trigger off violence, nor did high tolerance prevent it.

How to explain these paradoxical findings? In this we are faced with two questions: (1) If intolerance and hatred did not provoke the conflict, what did? (2) Are mass media really blameless in this story? I am going to try to answer these two closely related questions.

The key to the riddle: authoritarian orientation

In the mentioned survey (1989—1990), the subjects were offered the statement: "A people without a leader is like a man without the head". They were asked to express their agreement or disagreement with this statement ranging from "agree completely" to "disagree completely". Interestingly enough, 61.5% of all subjects (total Yugoslav sample) agreed completely. If we add to this number those who simply agreed with this statement, then this amounts to three quarters of the polled subjects. It must be noted here that Croats and Serbs deviate from the average values (Lazić 1991). How to interpret this finding? It indicates a value orientation which might be called authoritarian. Such a finding might have been expected: the political culture of the former Yugoslavia was authoritarian, despite the stucco of self-management.

In authoritarian cultures there is a deep need for a leader. "A leader knows what he is doing", could be heard in Third Reich. "Comrade Tito, we swear not to stray from your path", was sung in socialist Yugoslavia; "Slobodan, just say a word, we are going to fly like bullets", was sung (and is probably still sung) in Serbia. In short, a leader should be obeyed. Even when that means banishing and killing people of other nationalities, destroying homes and cultural monuments. So, the outbreaks of armed conflicts and the related mass violence were not connected with the average degree of national tolerance but how certain regions fitted into the expansionist designs of a leader. Slovenia remained outside the project of "Greater Serbia" and went unscathed by the conflict (with the exception of the ten-day war which Misha Glenny called counterfeit). Un-

like that, the conquest of Croatian territories (all the way to the Virovitica-Karlovac-Karlobag line) was a part of the project and led to the aggression and the violence. The entire Bosnia-Hercegovina was a part of the project and that is why the war there reached horrible proportions.

But the advocates of the mass media theory might say: All right, we agree that the authoritarian political culture is the key to the riddle, but in the warring countries, the successors of the former Yugoslavia, there is not one, but three leaders. All three of them are authoritarian nationalist leaders and bear equal blame. However, if the equal responsibility of the leaders is not a "theoretical" (meaning ideological) postulate but *questio facti*, as it should be in a serious analysis, then the following should be proved: (1) that the strategic goals of these three leaders on the eve of the war were symmetrical; (2) that the means used in the realization of these goals (politics) were roughly identical; (3) that the resources — primarily military — which were at their disposal, were mostly on a par. Up to now I have not set my eyes on a single political science study which would corroborate this. It is enough to compare the resources to get a clear picture without a deeper analysis. On the one hand Milošević had a control over the Federal Army (the fourth strongest army in Europe), federal government and federal hard currency reserves (politically, Ante Marković was a "straw man"), foreign policy apparatus and the capital of the former state. What did Tudjman have at his disposal after the 1990 electoral victory? The territorial army was disarmed and he could not even rely unreservedly on the regular police. The creation of the police forces (within the legal system of the former SFRY, the National Guard (the so called ZNG) could be founded only as the police force) and the lightly armed volunteers could hardly have served for defense let alone for an attack. Or, for that matter, what did Izetbegović have in 1992?

Thus, regarding the instigation of aggression and violence (and this is what we are dealing with here), the explanatory model based on an authoritarian national leader can be applied solely to the project of "Greater Serbia" and its agent Slobodan Milošević. Drawing conclusions on the basis of subsequent comparisons of the actions and the political regimes of these three leaders — despite all possible similarities — is a logical *non sequitur*.

The starting point of this model is that in an authoritarian culture people obey their leaders unquestioningly. However, since people are not robots and do not react mechanically, their leader must secure their "consent" (must convince them that his objectives are "lofty", "historic" and "sacred") and at the same time he must arouse their feelings. In short, he must mobilize them politically (Gellner 1983, Greenfield 1992).

Media and political mobilization

In an industrial society, it is difficult to achieve political mobilization without mass (primarily electronic) media. In the Nazi political mobilization the central role belonged to the radio, in the Serbian mobilization to the television. Which were the functions of the media in political mobilization?

The first was to misinform the population. Many ordinary people in Serbia, who had never holidayed on the Adriatic coast, were convinced by the media that there were no Croats there but only Serbs. Truth to tell, the lies about “Serbian Dubrovnik”, “Serbian Zadar” and other “Serbian” regions were not made up by the media but by intellectuals (the SANU “academics”, men of letters, and alike), but the media disseminated them. They also spread other fabricated historical, economic, political, and cultural misrepresentations. Misinformation does not create hatred but is the first step in that direction.

Second, the media systematically sowed distrust about other nationalities. The consequences can be seen in the polls conducted at the time, in which a significant number of people expressed the opinion that the co-operation among different national and ethnic groups was possible but that total trust was not (Lazić 1991). That is the second step.

When the media began to harp about the “imperilment of brother Serbs in Serbian Dubrovnik, Zadar, and so on”, and those who were otherwise tolerant became ready to rush to their “endangered brothers” aid — then the process of political mobilization was completed.

Let us look into the dramatization of the scenario about the “imperilment”. The feeling of imperilment was amplified and dramatized on million-strong mass rallies, broadcast by television. This created high emotional tension and euphoria. However, the production of the sense of imperilment is only one side of the mass dramaturgy. The other side is the creation of the sense of power and superhuman superiority which would crush the enemies who endanger the Serbian people. These two only superficially contrary feelings — of imperilment and superiority — amalgamated through a mythomaniac tradition and the nation’s “historical mission” (“divine Serbia”) made a deadly narcotic that ensured absolute and unconditional popular obedience to the leader and readiness to perform any crime the leaders may command in order to achieve their goals while at the same time it exempts individuals of any moral responsibility regarding the treatment of the “enemy”. In this, the leader does not count solely on nationalism and solidarity and the infantile need of individuals to feel omnipotent in their identification with the leader, but on down-to-earth materialistic and economic motives. Looting was among the strongest motives for political mobilization. Today, the paucity of chances

for pillage (since in Bosnia there is nothing more to rob) seriously undermines the fighting morale of Karadžić's and Martić's army.

What are the reasons behind this in-depth review of the process of political mobilization for the "Greater" Serbia? They are threefold:

First, the political mobilization in Serbia preceded the war on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. One should only remember the spectacle on Gazimestan, where saber-rattling was deafening. The political mobilization in Croatia and Bosnia and Hercegovina came later, on the eve of the open conflict. Although based on the same principles, the staging was much more modest.

Second, the political mobilization in Serbia is a text-book case of the populist mobilization at the end of this turbulent century, which even Lenin, Mussolini or Goebbels would not be ashamed of (Goebbels 1948). It came up with a masterly solution for an almost impossible psychological task: how to convince people on whose roofs shells do not drum and who the wailing of sirens does not force to take shelter in their basements, that they are endangered but at the same time that they are superior (that the whole world cannot harm them). Psychologically, Tudjman and Izetbegović had a much easier task: they did not have to convince their people they were endangered; they could feel it on their skin.

Third, the dramaturgy of the "happening of the people", "anti-bureaucratic revolution", and later "the tree-trunk revolution" would be unimaginable without electronic media.

When the conflict reached its active stage, the attitudes of both the attackers and the attacked changed rapidly: tolerance turned into extreme intolerance and lethal hatred. What media propaganda did not manage to achieve in a decade, happened almost overnight when arms spoke. *Grosso modo*, it could be said that the violence was not provoked by hatred, but that the violence provoked hatred. At this stage the efficacy of the media improved. Hatred-mongering reached unprecedented heights, and its sway over the recipients was greater than ever. People who are overcome by hatred seek out such food for soul that not only praises but *justifies* hatred acts. Once the armed conflict had begun, it gained its own momentum and escalated spirally. Media were but an element of that spiral inferno and here any monocausal explication is totally inadequate. Of course, in this phase, nobody was innocent. Croatian mass media played the central role in starting a chain reaction of violence, triggered off by the "ethnic cleansing" of the Croatian population on the occupied territories. The media (particularly television) brought into every Croatian home personal tragedies of the displaced persons and their redefinition of former neighbours as latent enemies who had shown their true face. Then, like in a forest fire, the entire primary social structure of interethnic relations in Croatia, which the media campaigns prior to the fighting had failed to destroy, went up in flames (Županov 1995, Dugandžija 1993).

Without the media the chain reaction would have hardly occurred. In short, advocates of the media theory have turned a blind eye to Durkheim's methodological rule that social facts have to be explained by the facts which precede them.

One disheartening conclusion

It is generally believed that the promotion of tolerance in plural societies prevents collective violence. In view of our experience, this thesis should be qualified: tolerance has a remarkable prophylactic value in nonauthoritarian political cultures. If, however, political culture is authoritarian, tolerance does no harm but it does no good, either. After fighting has started, falling back on tolerance in nonauthoritarian societies might stop the fighting, but in authoritarian systems such pleas will have no effect. Like in medicine, the rule in human societies is: if you start from a wrong diagnosis, the treatment will be to no avail. Thus social scientists, who blame media and do not understand the role of authoritarian cultures, conclude that the cause of the disease is the lack of true information and that people will "have their eyes opened" and "get cured" if offered the true information via foreign electronic media which are not under the control of the nationalist leaders. This was the guiding idea behind the installation of a floating radio-station with the motto *droit de parole* in the Adriatic. However, its programmes had a few listeners in Croatia and Serbia (according to my private information there were a handful of listeners on the Dalmatian coast and in Bosnia-Herzegovina) so that this operation was discontinued *en fin de compte*. This does not mean that nothing can be done in the Balkan crisis to stop it, but cancer cannot be cured by aspirins. Anyway, it is well-known how a similar disease was cured in Germany.

References

Gellner, E., *Nations and Nationalism*, Ithaca, N.Y.: 1983, Cornell University

The Goebbels Diaries, Garden City: 1948, Doubleday and Co.

Greenfeld, L. *Nationalism*, Cambridge, Mass.: 1992, Harvard University Press

Hodson R., Sekulić D., Massey G., "National Tolerance in the Former Yugoslavia", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 99, No. 6 (May 1994)

Lazić M. (ed.), *Položaj naroda i međunacionalni odnosi*, Zagreb: 1991, IDIS.

Merton R. K., *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Glencoe, Ill.: 1957, The Free Press

Popović M., *Žargon periferije*, Podgorica: 1994

Prpić K., Despot B., Dugandžija N. (ed.), *Croatian Society on the Eve of Transition*, Zagreb: 1993, IDIS.

Thompson M., *Forging War: The Media in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina*, London: 1994, Article 19, International Center Against Censorship

Županov J., *Poslije potopa*, Zagreb: 1995, Globus: in print

Translated by
Božica Jakovlev