

# PROSPECTS FOR MEDIA MONITORING: MUCH OVERDUE, BUT NEVER TOO LATE!

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## Media Monitoring: Why?

Two theses from the sociology of professions:

**Thesis #1:** Characteristic of a profession, like a guild in medieval and early modern times, is self-control, based on a contact with surrounding society, entitling the profession to set their own standards, to monitor their members, and to enforce them when necessary, including the use of reward and punishment.

**Thesis # 2:** The mechanisms of Thesis #1 do not work.

The reasons for the latter are obvious. What professions demand, and often get, is the same as what nations often demand: sovereignty, autonomy. But nations within a multi-national country can separate themselves from the other nations, drawing a territorial border around themselves, and become increasingly self-reliant, maybe even independent. A profession cannot do that; it depends on clients outside the profession for their livelihood (not like some psychoanalysts analysing each other).

The criteria of the surrounding inter-human society, and not only of the clients, will always play a role. A profession will never be permitted to be self-contained, being accountable only to itself. Actually, neither will nations: surrounding inter-nation society also imposes standards and demands accountability. And there will be paradigm shifts within the profession, pitting young generations with new standards against the interests of the older generation. In short: watchful eyes everywhere. Monitoring.

International journalism has recently shown its inadequacy in connection with two major conflicts in a way which should have led to major revolts and agonising reappraisals.

In the Second Gulf War, 17 January to 27 February 1991, the problem was not the infamous Pentagon pooling system, based on journalists they could trust, thereby engineering the outcome.<sup>1</sup> To blame a machine made for war "with all necessary means" (Security Council Resolution 678) for including manipulation of the news process among those means is like blaming a lion for not being

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vegetarian. The problem is the high level of acceptance among journalists, the low number who tried to obtain, often at considerable risk. **The independent** access to the events. And that acceptance seems to have run through the whole news chain, via agencies and editors to the end users. No massive refusal among journalists to use the pool system, no massive rejection of the highly orchestrated news conferences, no massive protests among readers/viewers/listeners have been reported. And this in presumably free societies! In countries occupied by Nazi-Germany during the Second World War there was at least massive scepticism of the official media, and in addition an alternative, illegal press assembled and distributed at even higher risks.

Whereas this was a clear case of the State manipulating what will reach Civil Society via the Media the Yugoslav War offers another, equally or more discomfoting picture of how Capital can manipulate. The classical techniques are obvious: buying space (or time) for the publicity, buying space for an article, buying a journalist, buying an editor, buying a paper, a radio or TV station, buying a whole news chain, buying a cartel of new chains.

But this time something else has entered the news chain: public relations agencies, with States as clients, constructing a virtual reality by systematically planting non-events as news, or changing focus and discourse in favour of their clients. This section of the Merlino-Harff interview should be printed or aired by all decent media for people to understand what is happening, not at the beginning of the news chain but toward the end.<sup>2</sup>

Question: What achievement were you most proud of?

Harff: To have managed to put Jewish opinion on our side.

Question: But when you did all this, you had no proof that what you said was true. You only had the article in *Newsday*!

Harff: Our work is not to verify information. We are not equipped for that. Our work is to accelerate the circulation of information favourable to us, to aim at judiciously chosen targets. We did not confirm the existence of death camps in Bosnia, we just made it known that *Newsday* affirmed it.

Question: Are you aware that you took on a grave responsibility?

Harff: We are professionals. We had a job to do and we did it. We are not paid to be moral.

The interests of the State (or states) are very clear.<sup>3</sup> But there is a new element: privatisation of news manipulation. The Pentagon worked like a massive, heavy machine, something like the US Mail. The public relations firms use "a card file, a computer, and a fax," "at the right time with the right person," targeting actors that are not only newsmakers but event-makers, with the efficiency (and no doubt the fees) one would expect from Capital as opposed to State. The victims are in Civil Society, led by the nose into a virtual reality very remote from the empirical or conventional reality some of us still seem to prefer as basis for opinion-formation, individual and collective, not to mention as a basis for action. But there has been no massive protests or investigation. The system seems to have no steering, no negative feed-back.<sup>4</sup> The media are, put simply, out of control.

## Media Monitoring: What Does That Mean?

Monitoring goes beyond merely recording. To monitor is to characterise something according to a criterion. In other words, monitoring means evaluating. We are doing it all the time: mapping others, individuals or collectivities, media, sometimes ourselves, mapping events like meals, contexts like restaurants on dichotomies of good-bad or on more refined scales of judgement. We cannot live without it. And of course,

