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The Aesthetic Alchemy of Sounding Impartial: Why Serbs Still Listen to ‘the BBC Conspiracy’

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The Aesthetic Alchemy of Sounding Impartial: Why Serbs Still Listen to ‘the BBC Conspiracy’

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*What impartiality requires is
not that everyone receive
equal treatment, but rather
that everyone be treated as an
equal. (Dworkin, 1977: 227)*

The decisive developments in the region once known as Yugoslavia, notably between 1987 and 2008, received substantial coverage by the BBC World Service both in its regional language services and its world headlines. We shall explore now how the Serbian audiences acquired information based on Western sources, particularly by tuning into the BBC, and how that information is critically talked about within Serbian public and private discourses. These discourses are decidedly multi-faceted, given the way they embrace all available sources: they are, for historical reasons we shall address shortly, eclectic in the best sense of the word: tune in to all media, but also always suspect all media of their own agenda. Interest in the BBC thus always comes coupled with systematic skepticism – as indeed do all other international broadcasters from Washington via Berlin to Moscow. The BBC’s aura of impartiality and its ex-Yugoslav audiences’ responses are therefore analyzed via the evolution of media-critical discourses. This distrust of any single media source can sometimes border on ‘conspiracy theories’, yet the latter term may equally be evaluated as a public civil culture of skeptical comparison. Some of these brim with insights unknown even to BBC habitués; others can only be dubbed as ‘conspiracy theories’ To trace this dialogical story and history of ‘the BBC and Yugoslavia’, let us take their common historical starting point.

The BBC World Service and Yugoslavia: What Do We Call the Language We Talk In?

The BBC World Service 'in Yugoslav', as it was officially called, went on the air on September 15, 1939, following the outbreak of World War II but preceding the Nazi occupation of Yugoslavia by more than a year and a half. Whether one credits this decision for a fourteenth BBC language service to prescience or a strategic European diplomacy, the naming of the language was politically and diplomatically correct as future developments would underline. It is safe to say that most Serbs in the inter-bellum Kingdom of Yugoslavia called their language Serbian, knowing that it was totally inter-intelligible with Croatian, as ethnic Croats called theirs. In Bosnia, the multi-ethnic microcosm of Yugoslavia, the mainly Catholic Croats, the Orthodox Serbs, and indeed the Muslims who would later be called Bosniaks, called their shared language either Serbian (*srpski*) or Croatian (*hrvatski*).

So the BBC's naming of the language it spoke was in itself a political statement: there should be a multi-ethnic 'artifice of a state' (Burckhardt 1944:16) called Yugoslavia, and its population of some 14 million (1939) was to be animated to resist Nazi Germany by a united service 'in Yugoslav'. As the war progressed, the BBC, too, took note of Yugoslavia's checkered ethnic and linguistic landscape. On April 22, 1941, precisely the day of the German attack on Yugoslavia, the BBC World Service was ready to broadcast a service 'in Slovenian', a service that would continue to underline the particularities of Slovenia until, notably, Christmas Eve 2005. Needless to add that Slovenian is effectively inter-intelligible with the 'Yugoslav' combination of Serbian and Croat into Serbo-Croatian; useful, however, to remember that Slovenia was the first Yugoslav republic to break away from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1991 and quickly received international recognition as an independent state. By the end of 2005, the existence of an independent Slovenia was so much taken for granted that the BBC felt it safe to stop its programs in Slovenian. The sentiment echoes with the closure, in 2006, of the BBC's services in Bulgarian, Polish, Czech, Slovak, Slovenian, Hungarian, Romanian, and Greek. In the new global geopolitics of the time, the funds for these services could, it seems, better be diverted into developing a television service in Arabic and another in Persian, although this was not, of course, a straight-forward swapping of funds.

Lest this emphasis on the BBC World Service's geopolitical mission may sound like an unwarranted aspersion, consider the earlier history of the languages broadcast to the territory of the former Yugoslavia. In 1991, when the war about Yugoslavia turned into a war in Yugoslavia, the BBC split its service 'in Yugoslav' into a service 'in Croatian' and 'in Serbian.' The former was switched off in 2006, the latter persists. A BBC service in Albanian was run from 1940, abandoned in 1967, but re-started in 1993 during the Kosovo Crisis. Clearly, speakers of Albanian did not suddenly fall silent for the intermittent 25 years. Rather, the BBC tuned into a geo-strategic interest by re-directing a service in Albanian at the Albanian majorities in the Serb province of Kosovo and the

eastern parts of the ex-Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. A BBC service in Macedonian was introduced on 6 January 1996 and has, since then, remained the youngest 'new language' initiative of the BBC across the world. Needless to add that most of the two million Macedonian speakers have no trouble understanding the 'Yugoslav' language once called Serbo-Croatian or even the standard version of Slovenian, and the same applies vice versa. Yet Serbo-Croatian is no longer the name of a language even in former Yugoslavia. Former Yugoslavs, including their new-nation-building linguists, now exploit any tiniest difference in accent and dialect to differentiate their once-shared language into Croatian, Bosnian, and Serbian. Yet the differences appear 'negligible': Standard variants of Croatian, Serbian and Bosnian are mutually intelligible, sharing much vocabulary, having the same morphology, phonology, and syntax. It is written in both the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets. Serbian and Bosnian use both alphabets, while Croatian uses the Latin only. Phonetically, the differences appear with the oppositions u/e, u/i, v/f, omitting 'h', and e/ije in the three variants of the *Štokavian* dialect. The word for news is *vijest* in Croatian and Bosnian and *vest* in Serbian, similarly its frequent accompaniments: coffee – *kava* and *kafa*, and tobacco *duhan* and *duvan*. Loan words and internationalisms have different endings in the infinitive form, such as: to inform – *informirati* and *informisati*. Others originate from similar shared heritages and are mutually understandable, such as the result of news: history – *povijest* or *istorija* and *istorija*.

This does not mean, of course, that Serbo-Croatian (note the hyphen as in nation-state) is a creation of nature. It is still a contested question whether these languages were 'forced together' by the nation-building Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1918-1945) and the nation-building Socialist Republic that followed it (1945-1991). Were the languages 'equalized' or were they 'merged'? In most circumstances before the war, the hyphenated creation of Serbo-Croatian was seen less as an indicator of linguistic divisions, but as a factor of regional variety enriching the common national language. In spoken usage, the differences are comparable to those between German speakers in Germany and Austria. Few of these nuances presented major obstacles to communication in the national lingua franca. Where the differences were larger, the Republic gradually recognized Slovenian and Macedonian as autonomous languages, but socialist state education forcefully enabled almost all citizens of Yugoslavia to communicate in the lingua franca. Given the Yugoslav policies of regional decentralization for each constituent Republic, even the distinction of Latin versus Cyrillic scripts made little difference in daily life.

How many people of the former Yugoslavia understand Serbian? Considering the population census data in the region and adding about 2,5 - 3 million 'Yugoslav' mother tongue speakers in the Diaspora it is safe to estimate that Serbian is understood globally by about 25 million people.

Not much research has been conducted on the BBC Serbian audience in Serbia proper. In the mid 1990s, the research commissioned by IBAR and carried out in Serbia on 1,600 adults (15+) showed that BBC was the leading foreign broadcaster with a weekly audience of 3.5% followed by Voice of America – VoA (2.7%) and Radio Free Europe –

RFE (2.4%). This research proposed that the listeners to BBC programs in Serbia did so 'to hear more news about Serbia and the former Yugoslavia'. The BBC was considered by most of its audience to have a distinctive 'sound' and to be easily recognizable. Most also agreed with the statement that they listen to it to verify news from other sources. However, only a third of the BBC listeners said they could trust what they heard on the BBC. (Hope-Stone, 1995:11)

Only 34% of listeners in Serbian felt that they could trust what they heard on the BBC, and 64% believed that what they heard on the BBC was controlled by the British government. 65% also agreed that the BBC does not understand what life is like for most people in Serbia. Just 34% of listeners believed that the BBC gave a balanced picture of the former Yugoslavia with more than two fifths actively disagreeing with this statement. The most recent audience research update stems from a survey conducted in Serbia and Montenegro (excluding Kosovo) in February 2002. It shows that the BBC audiences in English and Serbian have fluctuated slightly between 1999 and 2002, for example decreasing from 5.1% in 2001 to 4.6% in 2002. (Hope-Stone, 2001:11). Yet if there is considerable distrust about the BBC's impartiality, why then do so many Serbs and non-Serbs keep listening to it? The first approach to an answer lies in Yugoslavia's tradition, just about unique for any socialist country in the world.

Yugoslav Socialism and Media Pluralism: The Emergence of Multiple Patterns of Spiraling Usage

The Serbian audience has a history of gathering news through various sources – listeners do not limit themselves to one or two sources of news. Yugoslav journalists had/have a possibility to excel in their field. Curiosity and openness enable journalists and audiences to judge global issues. It can be ventured that all of this is a beneficial legacy of the Cold War which was, according to many, the 'golden age' of Yugoslav socialism with its generous attitudes towards freedom of people and media freedom. This is not to idealize this period but to outline the particular aspects which have shaped what we today may call Serbian media pluralism achieved within an 'experiment in consensus and cooperation represented by Yugoslavia' (Hawkesworth, 2007:16). Yugoslav socialism was commonly described as a unique brand, relatively open to the free flow of people and ideas, as contextualized by the BBC World Service's Andrew Taussig (2007:21):

Above all a country which had been the scene of bitterly partisan conflict during World War II seemed to have reasonable prospects of developing a better form of governance, demonstrating that, in a framework of federalism and socialism, dangerous ethnic sentiment could be subordinated to the good of the community as a whole: a new, civilized type of nationhood.

There were only a very few clear-cut taboos such as the socialist revolution, the role of Tito, the legacy of the partisan movement, and the Yugoslav particular interpretation and practice of the communist ideology. There were remarkably few cases of censorship, employed only in relation to these taboos. Media criticism concerning other fields of then Yugoslav reality was neither welcomed nor directly opposed by the authorities. The

establishment would rather strike back with general labeling of some media that 'propagate ideas conflicting with our socialist self-managing society' (Platform of Yugoslav Communist Party, 1985:64) or "self-management socialism," the correct doctrinal description of Yugoslavia's liberal brand of Marxism. (TIME, 1972). The identity of the stigmatized media or the author was not revealed but it was at all times certain and obvious. No other actions – save the protest or 'the expression of disagreement' – were taken. The establishment protested against foreign media interference into Yugoslav affairs in an analogous manner – labeling the 'intruder' as 'some foreign media'.

'Yugoslavia's diplomats carried credibility, Tanjug was a respected international news agency in an environment with serious balanced journals and newspapers' (Taussig, 2007:21). In this civil society environment of pluralist media usages, users then discussed throughout the, then largely unfettered, gray zone between private and public spheres. Foreign media were present on a massive scale and were accessible to everybody. It could not be different for a country annually visited by millions of tourists from the West and in return millions of Yugoslavs traveling to the West. The Yugoslav diasporas in the West were populated by about two million economic migrants and their descendants (*Gastarbeiter*). In fact, it was the openness of the country that rendered any imposition of the iron curtain unthinkable, both in a physical sense by preventing people from moving and via ideological actions by prohibiting the consumption of Western culture as it was the case in the Soviet block of socialist states where even Western literature, jazz, rock, film, entertainment, and the likes were blacklisted. In short, former Yugoslavia with her 'soft communism' (Andjelic, 2003) and her powerful image and leading role in the Non-Aligned Movement had achieved a sense of freedom and pride in the country and the sympathies from the West but it can be also ventured that such success of 'Tito's separate road' (Cambell, 1967) was in fact guaranteed by the Cold War system (Banac, 2001). This is perhaps the reason why the BBC audience in former Yugoslavia was small (average 4%) compared to other Communist countries 'probably reflecting lesser need in a less repressive information environment (Taussig, 2007:21). It was the period, described in BBC history, when 'striking the right balance was not easy' that is to say between the broadcaster and socialist Yugoslavia. Krsto Cvijić, known as Chris Cviic when he became editor of the BBC Yugoslav Service in the mid-1950s, remembers that period

How do you broadcast to a country which is becoming quite friendly to the West, which is trying to work out a new way of existing between East and West but at the same time keeping the same values not offending the local leaders too much because that may be contra-productive?

(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/history>)

Towards a peaceful and prosperous nation, support and 'friendliness' were the norm, but from the early 1990s the matters got rather complicated, consequently making the task of reporting very complex and diverse. This is the period – as felt by the audience – when BBC 'changed its agenda', taking a much larger role than merely reporting on the

Yugoslav crisis. It was also felt by the majority of informants that the BBC seemed to 'serve' the pro-Yugoslav option either by its own principles or reflecting larger Cold War realities by which Yugoslavia, due to its special position, had won sympathies and support. Yet as the country was pushed onto the road to disintegration, the BBC could not but take sides in a Europe-wide conflict of interests.

Then, with the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, Yugoslavia entered the rather confused state in which it became apparent how the ideals of the Yugoslav Federation fell short of a fully-fledged market economy within which the questions of conflict and differential distribution of wealth came to be reproduced on a newer and larger scale. The decline was gradual, leading towards the spiraling violence and wars into which the state eventually disintegrated.

Today it is fashionable to stress that the period of Yugoslavia's stability and progress was in fact based on artificial achievements and some external factors like the strategic position of the country during Cold War (Banac, 2001). 'Yugoslavia, whose prosperity was only superficial' (Gardiner, 2000:70) was not democratic and the democracy was the only possible political framework for such a complex state to exist (Crnobrnja, 1993:269). Nevertheless, the Yugoslav soft socialism is still largely and nostalgically felt across the region and its 'legacy of freedom and independence' is still remembered among surprisingly many 'YU-nostalgics' (Atlantis, 2006).

In spite of some realistic assessments about the past of Yugoslavia, it is still striking how the intensity of the YU-nostalgia both in former Yugoslavia and in the 'leftist' West increased over time. The former country is more and more seen as a paradise of equality, justice, freedom, and rights that were mercilessly obliterated by Western imperialism and its post-1990s expansion of liberal capitalism. The author of this article, himself born and educated in the former Yugoslavia, was many times not able to conceal his surprise at how the forgetfulness of his interviewees diminished the bad memories of the former Yugoslavia, which therefore became a kind of Yutopia.

The post-Yugoslav recollection of the former country is nowadays dominantly ideal. No informant seemed to remember that this utopian settlement was merely based on Western credits supporting Yugoslav's pompous dictator Tito and his jubilant masses. Nobody critically recollects of the absence of any cogent economical measures, of the absurd and ineffective Yugoslav concept of 'self management', of her shallow democracy, let alone of the endemic corruption at all levels, of the pharaonic life of Party functionaries, of the Darwinian jungle within the highest corridors of power, or of the mismanagement and dilettantism at all levels.

Even the BBC succumbed to that idealized notion of Yugoslavia defending at the eve of the civil war (1991-1992) the unity and the existence of Yugoslavia. However, as the demise of Yugoslavia and the Serbian collision with the West progressed, that support by BBC was suddenly lost. Serbian informants comment on that:

Not only that the old Yugoslavia disappeared but also the region was no longer the darling of the West. Favorable reporting on this region and of Serbia [1992 onwards] could not be upheld.

And:

By initiating the war we [The Serbs] are to be partially blamed for the way we are now treated and presented in the foreign media and the BBC. We can talk about anti-Serbian policies of the West and its media but there is very little choice – either to remain a pariah state always confronted against others or to join the main stream which is Europe as such, the West as such – not ideal but much better than our permanent nightmare.

These are moderate views of the two seemingly opposite kinds of Serbian audience. The views that are ‘less moderate’ often contain rigid and unforgiving reasoning: one observes the BBC as the plot-brewer and the most powerful western propaganda apparatus which is neither objective nor neutral. But most views, as it will be presented in the coming sections cannot be easily placed within anti-West or pro-West compartments or analogous dichotomies.

BBC editorial memoranda distinguish between ‘national intelligence’ and ‘liberal intelligence’ audiences in Serbia. The position towards BBC objectivity and impartiality in reporting would then depend on whether it is observed through national or liberal spectacles. BBC audience correspondence demonstrates that ‘even educated nationalists in Serbia who always detect the aspects of propaganda in western mainstream media, would nevertheless admit that the BBC is the best of all foreign media and that the programs serve well as the perfect guidance for the events in the region and wider.’ In contrast, the ‘liberal audience’ according to the Editorial is ‘very open minded and equally follows the regional and global events mostly deeming the way of reporting as informative, balanced, and fair’. (BBC editorial, January 16, 2008)

The polarization between liberal and nationalist audiences is simplified and implies that a Serbian listener is either pro or anti – West. We detected that many ‘liberal’ listeners while ‘supporting’ the Serbian ascent into the European Union do so in the absence of other options. This segment of the audience does not believe that the Western support for the independence of Kosovo is ‘a good thing’ and thus is not entirely supportive of all Western initiatives in Serbia. This simplification of ‘only two types’ of Serbian audience was felt in BBC reporting on presidential elections in Serbia (January-February 2008) where the dominant notion was that the vote was essentially a referendum through which the Serbs were about to decide whether they are ‘pro-European’ or ‘anti-European’ (BBC Europe website, February 3rd 2008 and BBC World TV headlines, February 4th 2008). The BBC’s audience researches from the mid 1990s with regard to the BBC Serbian Radio listeners may appear obsolete in the face of massive development of the Internet culture which did not bypass Serbia. In combination with previously developed media pluralism the new technologies have given rise to an up to date generation of news seekers which uses multiple, mostly Internet based sources. Old listeners conjuring up a romantic image of a wartime ‘secret gathering’ around a radio set, straining to hear news

coverage over the white noise and radio interference seem to belong to 'days long gone'. These listeners have been replaced, overwhelmed by a younger, intelligent, English speaking, Internet-savvy audience of which we will present here a number of individuals who also explain how these technologies 'invited' them to become regular BBC users. Such is Nebojša Avramović, a 32 year-old engineer but who works as a bartender hoping 'one day' to open his own café ('as does every Serb'). His first explanation is how he has stumbled across the BBC programs:

As we are all interested in politics and the news about our country, while searching the Internet we address our questions to a general provider. Any 'political' or regional topic (such as Yugoslavia, civil war, Serbian elections, UNPROFOR, UNMIK, NATO or nowadays the most searched topic being Kosovo – Googled or Yahooed would immediately produce thousands of hits of which the BBC ones would appear on page one. Further clicks will lead the user into 'the world of BBC World' which is very reliable, easy to orient, well organized, fast, logical, never infected, providing all the additional links which are very safe and sophisticated. Finding all of that at one place would make the user to put the BBC web site on his favorites for the future easy accesses.

This is the process by which a great number of accidental information seekers are becoming regular visitors of the BBC, thus increasing the size and the configuration of the audience. The survey conducted by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia reports online (<http://webrzs.statserb.sr.gov.yu/axd/en/index.php>) that 34% of the households in the Serbia possess a computer (45.4 % in Belgrade) while RATEL, a Serbian Telecommunication Agency (2008) estimates more than 40% internet users in Belgrade. According to enthusiasts like Nebojša, for the Serbian population which is 'incurably interested in politics', the simple click gives access to innumerable Internet choices and selections just like 'a book of wonders'. Apart from reading the texts in English or in Serbian the reader easily becomes the listener not only of the current broadcasting but could easily access radio and TV archives and different commentaries. Advanced computers have links to BBC TV and perhaps in the future even the computer will be outdated replaced by some pods or gadgets that contain 'all in one'. In return, future statistics might well be based on the numbers of clicks worldwide determining not only who is 'on line' but also which contents are of users' interest.

Another spiraling user, Dejan Popov (28), a postgraduate student at Belgrade's Faculty of Dramatic Arts, who said he is not interested in politics as 'happenings' but in the 'incredible ways of presentations'.

Observing the world via media and Internet is a surreal game. One can let his imagination be propelled with credible events of which the coverage appears stranger than the events themselves. For that game one has to have a good stomach. [...] But what BBC does in that game is a wonderful presentation that somehow does not leave a bitter taste. It is so artistic that you follow it with interest and sometimes with awe. And the BBC is deep.

In what respect is the BBC deep?

If you leave the depressing realities of world events as appear on BBC 'political' site and go 'behind' there are tremendously absorbing contents in arts and science, education and culture with rich documentary and entertainment assets: it is a marvelous production. That is my 'field' where I regularly go, browse, search, and read.

There is no news in the fact that the Internet 'revolution' brought forth entirely new types of audiences broadening the meaning of media consumers. The Internet provides now 'all in one' – a possibility to encounter the BBC on all its levels: TV and radio programs, web presentations and, most importantly, archives. It also offers other possibilities like replaying sequences of news or saving them for later use. Finally, all the other media are equally present on the Internet with similar possibilities for researching and browsing. These until now unthinkable potentials for getting information allow the audiences to establish this information as their 'private virtual property' and also to compare it with that of other sources

It is then the Internet that creates this media 'book of wonders' that goes hand in hand with long-established patterns of multiple usage and pluralist media competence. It causes the Serbian audiences to ever more keenly seek foreign sources including the BBC to enrich their knowledge, to combine it with what they had learnt from domestic media, to compare, and to collect material for discussions taking pride in being able to cite many different sources. It was a smooth change or a harmonious evolution of a new technology into much older and traditional patterns of public discussions and public exchange of the news and media trends of which we talk in the next section.

Café Culture and Street Corner Society: Socializing Contending Analyses by Pluralist Media Competence

This BBC audience, younger or older, may be equally 'deliberate and premeditated' or it may consist of 'indirect users and collateral down-loaders', new arrivals, who after viewing the contents by chance or more often by receiving a 'tip' from someone else are becoming regular users. The composition of the audience has certainly changed by the virtue of new technologies but – so to say – the traditional literary café audience is equally present. The habit and custom to meet in public space, exchange the news, and discuss them is a resonance of the older 'bohemian' tradition when many Belgrade's cafeterias (resembling Viennese *Fenstergucker* culture) were places for cultural exchange and even spots taken by the 'coffee house poets' to write literature and perform art. The heyday of the Belgrade's coffee houses dates back to 19th century and have been described in numerous travelers' diaries.

Consider how it is popular nowadays for many people going out in the Belgrade's bookshops for which the city is famous. Numerous bookshops are open late into night and over the weekend and are usually crowded; some even have small cafés attached. Otherwise, that 'Serbian' curiosity for 'infotainment' can be satisfied in either virtual

world of the Internet (we already mentioned high percentage of ‘connected’ households) or via Serbian cable TV system. It offers more than 60 channels of which roughly half are domestic. Those connected are able to watch BBC World TV as well as three other BBC TV programs (BBC1, BBC2, Channel4). Apart from the notorious CNN there is also Russia Today, the Russian world TV program in English. All state TV channels from neighboring countries (Former Yugoslavia) are available as well as the main cable operators from the West and a substantial amount of all-kinds commercial stations.

Importantly, all the leading educational channels are represented such as National Geographic, History Channel, Discovery and the like, all in English with Serbian subtitles. That is why the media market in Serbia seems to having nowadays much larger audience than estimated to several percent only in the previous audience researches. This, in combination with the above mentioned tradition of gathering and discussing news and the achieved level of media pluralism, may render the anti –West – pro-West and liberal versus national dichotomies obsolete. Serbian newsgathering culture and socializing by pluralist media competence needs to know but also to present and discuss. Knowledge is searched from multiple sources resulting in audience’s ability to differentiate between the sources. As we will later scrutinize the users’ reasons for following the BBC we will see that these ‘knowledgeable users’ cannot be categorized by their political convictions but rather by their ability to evaluate both the events and the way the media report on them.

It seems there is an emic and self-oriented world-view that is neither Eastern nor Western but both at the same time. The younger and educated represent a cosmopolitan part of Serbian audience which is by BBC’s criteria ‘highly educated decision makers and opinion formers requiring access to reliable, accurate and relevant information about global affairs’ (sourced from BBC’s analysis *Cosmopolitans, Approaches to Targeting*). It is here presupposed that BBC offers ‘reliable, accurate and relevant information’ but the audience of cosmopolitan image in Serbia seems to collect and digest these information to both enrich their knowledge but to take a critical stance towards their objectivity and impartiality. In these mediations a ‘unique’ relationship is established, the one that contains appreciation of BBC programming but rejects – more or less – the self-advertised notions of its performances. What in these settings is the ‘purpose’ of the BBC production directed towards Serbia?

Perhaps in the hopes of transporting its audience to a deeper appreciation of the current international state of affairs in which the fact that Serbia is at the losing side should somehow be taken by the audience just as a bitter medicine.

Bojan Stojanović (42), who stated this does not hide ‘some’ patriotic feelings at the outset, considers that the BBC’s ‘drive’ to educate, to bring to deeper appreciation, and ‘to liberate the Serbs from themselves’ is ‘an honest one’ for:

I am sure for every media it was difficult to follow and to present the enduring events of violence and chaos in such a complicated country like ours – small country with big problems, as it goes. If even we [the Serbs] still cannot grasp what happened in our own region, why and how – on what account could we

expect the foreigners, their politics, interests, and their media to understand all of it?

However:

The way they [BBC] are implementing such noble intentions should be more considerate [towards media consumers in Serbia]. Take Kosovo as an example and the latest news about the development [in the wake of Kosovo's declaring independence]: yesterday the prime minister of Kosovo Hashim Thaci said in Brussels that the Declaration of Independence is now a question 'of days' away. The news is brief and correctly gives the basic information. This news is one-third of the text and the next two-thirds contains always the same explanation about a province that wants to breakaway from Serbia; that this influences Serbian presidential elections, Russian 'strongly' opposes it, and that this province, 'technically still a part of Serbia' has been administered by the UN since NATO forces 'went into' Kosovo in 1999. There is neither substance nor 'soul' in this information.

This pattern captured by Bojan makes sense – in fact all recent news from Kosovo (November 2007 to January 2008) always included that regular explanation by which 'the news is factual and floating and the background is fixed with the already known facts'. [Bojan refers to BBC World article Kosovo's Independence 'in Days', January 24th 2008].

This article, which content we will analyze later, was also known to Radislav Rade Pešić (51), a teacher in a primary school, emphasized that his profession obliges him to be careful in assessing and explaining his own statements:

The news are made in such a way to justify and defend the Western point of view, in this case it is the same as the British point of view. The first thing is their dubious selection: some events are given ultimate importance and emphasized, but equally important events are either modestly covered or not mentioned at all. For example the way Milošević's death was covered was unfair – they [BBC] 'put blame' on him for dying while the accountability of the institution [The International UN Tribunal for Crimes in Former Yugoslavia in the Hague] was never settled.

How could or should the BBC have 'settled' this?

By offering a fair commentary, at least for us – the locals. Instead, in those days we read many – vast too many texts about his life, his legacy and his legal case. Not a single line addressing the Court [The International UN Tribunal for Crimes in Former Yugoslavia]. We – I say most people here – felt blackmailed. If we 'objected' about the treatment of Milošević and the obvious negligence of his health we would have then appeared pro-Milošević and against justice. Finally, after all that mess vanished, the impression was left that he, as a person and a former politician, did not deserve any critical media reflections thus the Institution that ill-treated him was not to be blamed.

This case (the death of Milošević) is still an issue discussed in Serbia which demonstrates that for many it is still an open question. Here, Radislav did not rise any plot-brewing assumptions but many are saying that that ‘the right questions have not been asked’, [by the BBC] and that the number of people who died in prison (from natural causes or suicide) during the course of the trial is ‘more than suspicious’. In total, six Serbs died in this prison, including Milan Babić, former Serbian leader in Croatia, who committed suicide just a week before Milošević died. The part of the Serbian audience is particularly keen in asking whether the negligence of Milošević’s health was intentional, or merely accidental, but this seems to be a minor plot-postulation; the larger is that the BBC did not provide balanced reporting, taking on its share of responsibility.

In fact, looking back into the headlines between 8th and 20th March of 2006, the BBC coverage of Milošević’s health and death included dozens of articles and news, hundreds of links and ‘in depth’ features but it is impossible to single out a line that addresses the question of responsibility and calls for the consequences. The weight of the event was merely put on history articles and obituaries examining Milošević’s legacy. Only one of the texts stated the failure of the International Court – not so much on account of Milošević’s death – but concerning the impossibility to pass the verdict and finish the process (“The Worst Outcome for the Tribunal”, BBC World, March 12th 2006).

Biljana Djorović (46) the editor of Radio Belgrade’s popular cultural program ‘Atlantis’ states:

By omitting any criticism towards the UN, the Western institutions and their diplomacy the balance – of which the BBC is above all keen – is damaged. The world from which the BBC is reporting then looks just and unified in doing good. People who are not well informed [non Serbian listenership] about the Balkans would [by following the BBC coverage on Milošević’s death] only learn idealized facts – a noble effort [by the West] to persecute an indicted war criminal, and how great the intention was, but will not get an impression that his ill health was neglected.

Are there more examples of this?

Yes. The most recent ones on corruption scandal in Kosovo: corruption of the UNMIK [United Nations Interim Administration Mission for Kosovo]. It is again an institution that for the BBC cannot fall under criticism. It came into the open after a series of articles by the Swedish writer and journalist Maciej Zaremba published in prestigious Dagens Nyheter providing an account on corruption in Kosovo, based on the investigation conducted by Inga-Britt Ahlenius, a Swedish UN Bureau Chief for Revision and the European Anti-Corruption Organization (OLAF) between 2003 and 2006. These reports listed quite a number of corruption cases of UN personnel, starting with Bernard Kouchner, the then UN representative for Kosovo, today the French minister of foreign affairs. It also includes several other top officials among them British. This report is based on facts and official figures and the allegations are solid. BBC never says a word about it.

Are you saying that ‘some issues’ simply are not brought into the open by the BBC, the events that ‘never happened’ following the coverage?

Or no-coverage. Check this and you will see that many affairs and many cases of institutional corruption were never given attention. If you imply that there is a difference between priorities that is to say why something that looks priority to us should also be a priority to them – I remind you that this UNMIK [corruption] case is huge and involves hundreds of millions of stolen funds under the gaze of high representatives and officials. I assure you that many minor cases would have deserved BBC’s scrutiny if happened somewhere else – that is outside of the realm called The West.

Any criticism towards international institutions, Western diplomacy, and their actions in the region does indeed seem absent in BBC reporting by which a number of issues ‘go missing’. To tentatively touch upon this topic here, it is difficult to make a claim that there are taboos in the BBC conception, or that the Western institutions involved in the Ex-Yugoslav affairs are not subject to criticism. Yet here we must penetrate the ‘deep BBC’ where it is possible to find some critical reflections on these issues, either by signed commentaries of BBC columnists or by linking the audience to other voices – that is by presenting press review and summaries of how some other Western (chiefly British) media coverage has dealt with the issues in question.

In this context, it is most instructive to study users’ reactions to a BBC article entitled: Kosovo’s independence ‘in days’. It was a rather rare opportunity that three independent informants, who did not know each other, referred to the very same article published on January 24th 2008, just three weeks before Kosovo, supported by Western powers, declared independence. These interviews conducted on January 25th and 26th show the ability of informants to analyze the media text not only in their own terms but also in relation to the Corporation’s patterns of reporting designed to safeguard impartiality. Analyses by the informants of ‘typical’ news with ‘poor content’ and ‘always repeating the backbone’ reported by the BBC are presented below to see point by point how ‘the permanent structure’ is enriched with the new facts as they were happening.



Kosovo's independence 'in days'

Kosovo Prime Minister Hashim Thaci has said a declaration of independence is "an issue of days".

"There are some procedures we need to respect and some consultations," he told reporters after meeting EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana in Brussels.

Kosovo is still technically a southern province of Serbia, which strongly opposes its independence. EU states have asked Kosovo's leadership to wait before a civilian mission can take over from the UN.

A police and judicial staff of about 1,800 is being prepared to work in tandem with the existing Nato force that went into Kosovo in 1999.

'Pandora's box'

The future status of Kosovo is also an important issue in the Serbian presidential election, which goes to a second round early next month.

The BBC's Oana Lungescu says the EU wants Hashim Thaci to delay declaring independence until the election is over.

A European Commission spokeswoman earlier declined to discuss a date. "We are in a very sensitive political context in which it is better to resort to diplomatic means than to public statements," she said.

In his comments to reporters, Mr Thaci repeated earlier statements that a declaration would be made in co-ordination with the European Union and the United States.

Russia insists any change in Kosovo's status must have the backing of Belgrade as well as

Pristina. Moscow's new ambassador to Nato, Dmitry Rogozin, has called on Serbia to resist Western recognition of independence for Kosovo, saying it could open a "Pandora's box".

BBC World News: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/europe/7207266.st>, published: 2008/01/24 16:09:55 GMT: © BBC MMVIII :

This BBC reporting on Kosovo with regards to its approaching independence presents the pattern employed in general for all the articles following this issue. All the BBC World and BBC Serbian articles on Kosovo lately contain a few 'new' sentences about the recent development and about a double amount of 'old' sentences always repeating the 'hard facts' about Kosovo – its independence is backed by the West, Serbia is 'strongly' opposing that (with Russia's support) and that this 'technically' Serbian province is under UN protection.

This article also appears on BBC Serbian in a literal translation from English. The majority of Serbian audience asserted that 'there is very little news in this headline although it sounds rich in events and people involved'. They complained that 'important things' are not told – namely that the Kosovan independence is 'forced' by 'illegal' means, it is 'a dangerous precedent' and that it represents a 'grave violation of international relations and Serbian sovereignty'. It ignores and humiliates Serbia insofar as this reporting is filled with 'superiority verging upon arrogance'. As such this reporting is not seen as 'impartial'.

There are a few interesting 'impartiality techniques' about the article(s) in question and in relation to the BBC's Serbian audience that were identified by those informants.

1. Pre-selected Agenda: The different views of ‘importance’: what appears important to the Serbs may not bear the same (or even any) importance for the BBC reporting. Political concerns raised by the Serbian audience and expressed in political jargon (‘forced’, ‘illegal’, ‘precedent’, ‘violation’, ‘sovereignty’) are not the issues for the BBC. The issue is the current state of affairs in Kosovo and the intention of the West to push its independence as the only solution. Asking here to broaden the BBC news agenda would mean ‘having a point of view’ for the BBC thus challenging its impartiality. In other words the BBC is implementing its ‘impartiality’ by strictly concentrating on a singular issue that is, in this case, the development of Kosovo independence and the news delivered only in that respect. All ‘surrounding’ issues (meaning Serbian issues) are not the subjects of this reporting.

2. Core – Peripheral Setting: The reporting is either given to the stringers who often are not well informed about the region or, in worse scenarios, to parachute journalism. In reporting on world headlines from the region both ‘producers’ act in the same manner attaching what is new to the already established pattern. Whether they do it for their own ‘protection’ in order not to disobey the ‘instructions’ or to ‘safeguard’ impartiality is the question.

3. ‘Officiality’: The weight of argument and the final comment or say is given to different representatives, officials, politicians, spokespeople, and other actors. Official statements are not subject to any doubt(s), unofficial opinions and critical reflections remain ‘opinions’. Thus the article above is filled with ‘he told reporters’, ‘she said’, ‘EU have asked’, ‘spokeswoman declined’, ‘in his comments’, ‘he repeated’, ‘Russia insists’, ‘ambassador has called’ etc. It seems that all precautions are taken to avoid any risk of ruining a ‘pure’ and impartial reporting by giving the voice to anybody who may be opinioned about the subject.

4. ‘Play it safe’: The journalists, under pressure to follow the guidelines supposed to ‘safeguard’ impartiality, are often forced to skip analytical parts in their reporting thus ‘self-censoring’ since any analyses by them may be understood as implying their opinions and views. With this, the narrative appears dry and too neutral, ‘depersonalized’ to the point that the audience experience the news as an official proclamation.

5. Inviolability of Western institutions: By informing world and Serbian audience about the event and by not questioning or criticizing ‘their own’ (Western) institutions or by ‘hiding behind official authorities’ the broadcaster appears unbiased but then institutional bias becomes apparent and the audience may feel confused if not misled.

6. Smoke-screening an issue through rhetorical jargon: Not much meaning can be attributed to the somewhat bureaucratic style of this reporting. Rather too much loyalty is expressed towards: ‘procedures’ to be ‘respected’, ‘some consultations’, ‘a civilian mission’, ‘UN’, ‘A European Commission’, ‘A police and judicial staff’, ‘NATO’, ‘a very sensitive political context’, ‘co-ordination’ - and similar constructions. These expressions are examples of legality and the power of legal institutions to solve the issue

of Kosovo, yet all of them Western, thus (for the Serbian audience) insinuating an approach of: 'we know best what is good for you'.

7. Twelve bottles: It is worth citing what is impartiality for the BBC itself. It is 'ambitious, home-grown aspiration' developed 'culturally rather than legalistically' (*From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel: Safeguarding Impartiality in the 21st Century, BBC Trust Guidelines*, p. 27.) The definition of impartiality is 'left to philosophers' but its 'magical substance' is explained via imagining twelve bottles on the 'alchemist's shelf' labeled as: Accuracy, Balance, Context, Distance, Evenhandedness, Fairness, Objectivity, Openmindedness, Rigour, Self-Awareness, Transparency and Truth: None of these on its own could legitimately be re-labelled Impartiality. But all the bottles are essential elements in the Impartiality compound, and it is the task of the alchemist, the programme-maker, to mix them in a complex cocktail (p. 23).

The Aesthetics of Production and Consumption: Soothing Voices, Decent Manners, and The Art of Story Telling

Much of the attraction of the BBC production is based not in its perceived impartiality but as an appreciation of its style and aesthetics. Consider, for instance, this memory of Bisenija Kotarić (72), a retired department store manager, who associates BBC with her own memories of living in a socialist country:

I do remember turning on BBC Yugoslav, say in the seventies, mostly. But I have to admit - it was not so much to hear some political news. There was something different there. The speaker had a wonderful voice with a calming tone [*smiren ton*] and it was a different voice.

What exactly was that *smiren ton*?

Saying the things in a nice and polite way, slowly, without emotion, carrying some said Mister Stalin. In a country where Mrs and Mister were expelled and replaced by comrades - it was nice to know that nice manners still existed. Moreover, after all what that Stalin did, BBC still would not change their politeness.

The *smiren ton* literally means soothing tone but the word *smiren* also captures the meaning of something gentle, peaceful, and relaxing. It was in contrast, as Mrs Kotarić explained, to the 'loud' and 'gaudy' socialism where good manners were somehow derelict. It is then that urge for the civic politeness and proper addressing (above all to those denoted a person of good family) that was missing. This is a fabulous illustration of the difference between 'hard' and 'soft' socialism but it also demonstrates – in a way – how the preceding Yugoslav bourgeoisie 'felt home' by inserting themselves into a 'different' yet familiar environment whereby people behaved decently to one another and spoke softly. It is the prime success of the BBC to have employed that style and 'culture'

to win the minds of the listeners who use the program to witness something absent from their own sphere of existence: essentially, by providing dignity to all people.

Despite audiences' political objections and certain bitterness about the way the BBC is reporting on Serbia the audience agrees on BBC's good taste and well-told story. Firstly, it is that seductive effect of the production which is unanimously experienced by virtue of its 'astounding' design. It is here that the BBC is able to impartially balance equal amounts of attractiveness of the story with the sheer technical expertise and artistic virtuosity. This is the aesthetic that remains 'objective' and, as such, valued and respected by all audiences. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the manner in which the BBC tells its story doubtlessly hits home for the Serbian audience. The political content of a message and the underlying tone – sometimes with a whiff of condescension – may be met with suspicion and protest but the swiftness, economy, and momentum of the storytelling makes the 'rough parts' more acceptable and easier to tolerate. These ascribed aesthetics of the BBC programs for the Serbian audience may be understood as an independent quality but could also be associated with another important feature that appeals to the audience – the seductive art of storytelling. For most informants every piece of news is understood as a story - be that story heard on radio, read on the website, or viewed on TV. Why such a story is anticipated and even looked forward to by the Serbian audience is the question answered and summarized by Ljiljana Bogoev Sedlar, a professor at the Belgrade Academy of Dramatic Arts:

BBC headlines, brief news, reportages, analyses, commentaries, and documentaries, both on global events and regional issues, are the presentations of reality, the carriers of meaning transmitted by the Western media and expressing the Western point of view with a self-asserted belief of impartiality. This is done in a sophisticated manner of storytelling making such reporting interesting and attractive for the Serbian audiences regardless of possible inaccuracies of the BBC reporting: this is of course not to say that the reporting is inaccurate by rule but that the storytelling is not determined by accuracy.

The art of storytelling is of more importance to this audience than the factual background of the story. The roots of the attachment to this art are much deeper than it was possible to extract from the participants in this research. Their most pronounced statements are that the BBC stories are 'intelligent', 'interesting' and 'attractive', sometimes 'funny' and, 'even if lacking some true facts, still informative'.

This 'out of the ordinary' relation between 'fact' and 'truth' for the Serbian audience is perhaps part of a century long tradition of narratives and storytelling as an important aspect of Serbian or Balkan heritage. By reading these stories the audience is able to find their point of view even though it seems to them that incomplete and partial stories often circulate 'just like forged coins among real ones'. The Yugoslav Nobel Prize winner Ivo Andrić asserted that even stories that are for the most part imaginary, conceal the truth as people were often able to extract 'a grain of truth' from these stories and, if nothing else, the false information may serve them 'as a starting point which they could easily discard when they had discovered the truth' (Andrić, 2008: 25).

In the forward to Ivo Andrić's volume of short stories *The Damned Yard* (2008) Celia Hawkesworth, a lecturer in Serbian and Croatian at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College, London states that among Andrić's central themes are the stories and storytelling tradition which encapsulate:

[T]he survival of the imagination in face of the all-engulfing encroachment of time, the notion that stories of all kinds should be heard, for every story is 'true', the endurance of essential patterns of experience in new forms in different ages, the arbitrary nature of power and social organization, and above all the notion of the imagination as providing a means of escape from constraint. (Hawkesworth 2008: 12)

Hawkesworth sees in this attachment to storytelling an 'essential experience of the South Slaves under 500 years of foreign rule' and illustrates this by analyzing Andrić's novella *The Damned Yard* which is in fact 'a story about story-telling: the kinds of stories people tell, the way they tell them and the reasons they are telling them' (p13). This is important because a clear parallel between the historical tradition of story tellers and audiences and today's relation between the modern media and its audience can help to understand this 'strange' attachment of the BBC Serbian audience to a broadcaster 'not to be trusted'.

Very similarly, the stories in *The Damned Yard* present the narrator (Fra Petar) as:

the archetypal self-effacing, reliable, balanced narrator who lets history speak for itself without comment or intervention. He is the artist who brings a special indefinable quality to his storytelling, a distinct and inimitable 'style'. Nevertheless, Andrić, the ultimate narrator, seems to suggest that all these different kinds of narration should be listened to, for there is something to be learned from everyone and we would know far less about human life if we selected solely according to our personal taste and affinity (Hawkesworth, 2008:13).

The power of the stories told by the BBC is emphasized by the observable popularity of the BBC's more long-term production, above all its documentaries. The more these documentaries are distanced from the daily politics, the better they are received. But even political documentaries are critically evaluated by the audience and denied their impartiality at times. One may think here of the 'epic' and influential BBC documentary series *The Death of Yugoslavia* broadcast in 1995. Covering the downfall of Yugoslavia with excellent archive footage and interviews with the main protagonists in the conflict is a subtle masterpiece of construction featuring uncommonly intelligent screenplay. From the point of telling the story, 'presenting the case', choosing the background scenes, and voiceover's narration adds just the right amount of over-serious gravities describing not merely the plot but also providing insights into the characters. Yet, if one wants to dwell on the historical inaccuracies in this documentary, a lot is to be blamed on surprisingly superficial, confusing, and misleading subtitling (from Serbian into English). However, it is difficult to insinuate here that the subtitles were flawed because the original material with full transcripts is made available at King's College London (<http://www.kcl.ac.uk/lhcma/cats/yugoslavia/xd20-0.htm>).

Following some public discussions and forums on this BBC documentary (such as at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0283181/usercomments>) one can get the impression that the series left no one unmoved. The opinions range from appreciation – ‘a genuinely fascinating documentary’, ‘a must documentary’, to some critical analyses such as that ‘speculations and assumptions are shown as undeniable facts’, that ‘interviewing the architects of the war in the former Yugoslavia means that we are hearing a subjective point of view, not an impartial objective one’. There are voices pointing out that the quality of the subtitles, which were at times incomplete and even wrong, reflects ‘a persistent bias’. Finally, a minority of the discussants in these forums assert that ‘the documentary was flawed’ or that the whole thing is ‘the Anglo-Saxon fast-food history’. This audience’s claim to their own impartiality in relying on the BBC documentary speaks volumes here of their ability to accept the story told but also to critically assess the facts ‘for there is something to be learned’. The audience’s confidence in the way the BBC presents the story as well as in their own search for the facts and the truth ‘beneath the story’ constitutes the final feature of the Serbian BBC audience – conspiracy theories which are to be examined in the second half of this paper. Before we do so, let us briefly summarize the ten main listeners’ motives emerging from the data.

1. Curiosity about the Western perspective. This can be seen as the audience’s inquisitive behavior trying to find out what is offered in terms of the news (designed by BBC) and whether it departs from the knowledge of the ‘insiders’. A great number of examples – as quoted by the informants – show that the points of view diverge mainly on how the piece of news is presented and what relevance and importance are associated with it.

2. To prove, also to others, how biased the West is: How the events are covered and whether the BBC favors or vilifies the event in question often serves as particular evidence against BBC’s ‘neutrality’.

3. Comparing biases across media-scape: What escapes BBC’s attention but was covered by other media (mostly domestic) is another proof of partiality of the former: ‘Serbian media headlines are sometimes minor news on BBC Serbian’.

4. Benefiting from BBC’s information: the informant’s analysis is strengthened by the knowledge acquired even from biased sources.

5. Hope that BBC is more objective about the rest of the world: In this respect BBC seems to be objective, neutral, and inspiring in presenting distant and political topics: “The farther from the West the more of political correctness”.

6. Presentation and Bush House Style: Supreme and almost magical achievement in visual, audio, and electronic presentation observed as: ‘boisterous appearance’. ‘Even violence is so designed and polished that it isn’t disgusting’.

7. Techniques of temptation, visuals, even aural branding: The techniques of temptation are simply ‘capitalistic’ – ‘BBC delivers a polished picture of the West full of efficiency

and esthetics as an excellent product of thriving capitalism yet with doubtful honesty'. This opinion was humorously voiced by this somehow macho comment: 'Among all the foreign media, the BBC is the most beautiful girl in the village – we may not like the way that girl is talking but we are still amazed by her attractiveness'.

8. Conspiracy assumptions: In Serbia – the promised land of conspiracies – a lot can be attributed to a global plot against the Serbs. 'It looks a lot like a lot want to keep a lot in the dark', 'the reputation of the BBC is justified for its subtlety only'.

9. Learning the tricks of the trade: It is a must that any Serbian participant in 'literary café' who cares about his reputation, is able to cite world media coverage about the event discussed. 'A respected discussant is a well-informed one for his co-discussants are well-informed too.' And 'The BBC school of persuasion techniques is to be learned from and mastered'.

10. The adventure of exploring BBC: 'BBC is not boring at all – there is always the thrill of the unexpected' and 'The sweet thing about BBC is snatching the right conclusion out of a welter of speculations! Curiosity, building the worldview and knowledge are the main motives of Serbian audiences. Seeking and attaining knowledge from the BBC in Serbia is also achieved to make an impact on others. Political discussions seem to be vital for the society and in this respect it can be said that 'to have something to discuss with other people is decisive for many Serbian listeners. To talk to others here also mean to gain knowledge for the discussions, and the BBC seems to be an important source as well as an inspiring one. The Introduction already outlined the BBC's own categorizations of its audiences, and we may come back to these here. The self-ascribed profiles of the Serbian and ex- Yugoslav listeners correspond remarkably closely to the BBC's audience category of 'Aspirants.' In its approach to the listenership at large, the BBC's category 'Aspirants' show almost congruent motives, though omitting eventual critical stances of the audiences. In this respect the BBC's aspirants do not appear much different from the Serbian ones.

What is very useful for the Serbian audience is to regularly 'check' the news and commentaries provided by the broadcaster: To examine these for the Serbian user it is of his 'testing' ability to detect any bias or to find out how the piece of news is presented in relation to what is important for the user. Conspiracy theories here play critically: for most Serbs the prevalent opinion is that the West did conspire against them. That is why we want to present these 'conspirative' moments that gradually evolved into Serbian public and media discourse as the events in the last twenty years have created almost unified opinion that Western media – and the BBC – did in fact take an active role within a number of conspiracies made in the West to destroy Yugoslavia and to keep Serbia weak and dependent for much larger geo-political and strategic ends.

Serbia in a Global Plot: Three Waves of Conspiracy Theories

Today, scholars and media analysts agree that the late eighties brought more media freedom in Yugoslavia and the final disappearance of former socialist taboos. It was possible now to write for or against 'Brotherhood and Unity', the legacy of Tito's socialist revolution, and the sanctity of the name Yugoslavia was no longer sanctioned. On the contrary, it met with more interest by the curious audiences to finally follow the increasing public debates about the core values which over decades could not be challenged. The Serbian media 'through the gradual erosion of both press control and traditional taboos', became more 'polemical' and 'sensational' (Malcolm 1998:338) But the moment at which the media finally became 'fully free' was, at the same time, the moment of its downfall. This particularly applied to the reign of Slobodan Milošević who came to 'enjoy a popularity greater than any Serbian political figure in this century' (Djilas 1993:83). After his rise to power in 1987, nationalism in Serbia became more and more predominant until it was the only political programme. It was the time when the Serbian media was strong on daily propaganda containing many conspiracy theories and also historical and cultural accounts of the glorious Serbian past.

No matter what aspect of Serbian history one cares to examine, the official version emanating from Belgrade appears to be at odds with the facts. What is especially depressing is that not so long ago, before Milošević's emergence, Serbia was, in many way, the most liberal and progressive of Yugoslavia's republics. The Serbian media were remarkably open by the standards of Eastern Europe and political opposition was tolerated, if not encouraged. (Christopher Bennet for the Greek Helsinki Monitor in 1999)

Motives repeated with preference dated back to the Serbian imperial period during the Middle Ages when the dignitaries were literate (compared to the illiterate Western kings), when they ate with golden forks and when the whole empire was defending Europe against the invasion of Turks and Muslims. Most media had kept repeating endlessly the importance of Serbia's strategic location between two continents 'attracting' invaders of all sorts and emphasizing that Belgrade had, so the statement, been leveled to the ground by thirty different armies in recorded history (Duga 1992: 192).

Every conceivable event from Serb history was dredged up and distorted to feed the persecution complex of ordinary people who, at a time of collapsing living standards, were gradually taken in by the barrage of xenophobia. The atmosphere was so heated and the campaign so all encompassing that people lost touch with reality (Bennet, 1999).

Yet these dynamics were benign in comparison with the daily campaigns against the Serbian-suspected 'fifth column'. With his combination of populism and the awakened sense of people's power, 'the cleansing encompassed all parts of society from the political leadership, the media, and factory directors, down to grassroots' (Lovrić, 1993:284). Almost all the media were merged into the same compartment with the

nationalist criterion as the only valid one. Myths and truths were discovered on a daily basis and the populace was pumped up with hatred. Serbian journalist Stojan Cerović observed in 1992 that Serbia was probably the first place in the world to establish a 'television dictatorship' as a new model of power. He may have overlooked precedents in the West, yet he was right in matching how even independent newspapers and journals faded into the background 'in a backward and impoverished country that reads less and less, lacking the money even for bread' (Lovrić, 284).

The political and media conditions then prevailing in Serbia were perhaps best explained by Leslie Woodhead, the film director who spoke to the BBC 4 Storyville on 5 December 2002:

Slobism is defined by Aleksander Tijanić as "an odd mix which at first sight looks completely democratic and western - a multi-party system, parliament, elections, basic free media. But in fact everything runs the way the ruler wants. He rules practically without restrictions through the secret police, money controls and the media." As journalist Stojan Cerović puts it: "It was a kind of façade democracy - Milošević was essentially a dictator, but the system was not a dictatorship." As I say at the beginning of the film, I see *Slobism* as "a fatal brew of dictatorship by television, ethnic rabble rousing and mass hypnosis". (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/documentaries/storyville/milosevic-interview.shtml>)

Jovan Byford, the author of *Conspiracy Theory: Serbia against New World Order* (2006) asserts that the sources of Serbian conspiracy theories are always to be found in some sort of reinterpretation of the exiting theories, some created in Serbia, some abroad. The whole theory about New World Order (permanently discussed and analyzed on Serbian state TV by the program 'specialist' Smilja Avramov) had its source in the world of ideas of Gary Allen and the John Birch Society and especially in that of Ramsey Clarke who was even granted an audience by Milošević.

Byford observes that a whole 'discourse of doubt' had emerged, leading even to a serious assessment of obviously ridiculous and fantastic conspiracy theories. The Serbian media dwelt extensively on the broadcastings of Western media including BBC in order to prove to their audience how the West manipulated the public opinion both in their countries and worldwide. Furthermore, if the Western media showed so much as a shred of agreement with the point of view of the Serbian media, the latter gave it a lot of coverage easily 'proving' that even the Western conspirators had lost control over their own media and that the whole plot [ujdurma] was facing collapse.

Thus, Erehwon - published in English by the PEN Center of Former Yugoslavia in Amsterdam cited (1996) Milos Vasić, a journalist of Belgrade's weekly Vreme, with his decalogue of the most popular conspiracy theories in Serbia and the main plotters:

- 1) The Vatican, 2) World Jewry, 3) The Comintern, 4) Islamic fundamentalism,
- 5) USA-led imperialism, 6) Freemasons, 7) Coca-Cola and jeans culture, 8) plutocracy, 9) decadent and soulless Western civilization, and 10) "Democracy"

Vasić also summarizes the main reasons why all of these conspirators are against Serbia:

because the Serbs (a) love freedom, (b) have dignity, (c) want to live together, (d) are defending hearth and home, (e) want only what is theirs, and (f) stand in the way of a crusade being waged by the ten conspirators listed above.

This preoccupation with conspiracy theories can perhaps be best explained by recalling the famous or infamous statement made by ultra-nationalist Radovan Karadzic in 1993: “We are not against the whole world, the whole world is against us”. In Milošević’s famous speech to the mayors of Serbia in March of 1991 during a closed session at the Serbian Parliament he explained that after its reunification Germany sought to create a new European order with the support of US capital: “We have information, reliable information, that a desire has arisen for the restoration of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy; that they are counting on all of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Vojvodina, and a part of the Sandžak. It is also part of their strategy to annex Kosovo to Albania”. Finally, after Milošević’s death, the famous BBC television presenter Gavin Esler, reporting from Serbia in 2006 about the Serbian accusations that Milošević was killed in the Hague, stated that for Belgrade conspiracy theory is a ‘central’ (according to Byford, 2006).

In this *Foire aux Illuminés* (Ignatieff 2001) the audiences of the Serbian mainstream media and particularly of the state television (RTS) had been bombarded with conspiracy theories on a daily basis. The air of seriousness was provided through the presence of some of the leading Serbian intellectuals. That was the time when ‘early’ conspiracy theories began to pour from the Serbian media starting with Milošević’s ‘orchestrated campaign of nationalist hysteria, focused on Kosovo but widening gradually to conjure up for Serb audiences an unholy alliance of Albanians, Slovenes, and Croats’ (Glenny, 1999:628).

It is common knowledge that Slobodan Milošević has used the Belgrade Law School as a major legal lever to justify his manipulation. In this context, professors Smilja Avramov, Ratko Marković, Oliver Antić and Kosta Čavoski have played key roles (Biserko, 2007). In analyzing this whirlwind of conspiracy theories over the last twenty years it is best to distinguish three different ‘waves’ of conspiracy theories.

The first started in 1987 and coincided with the rise of Slobodan Milošević and Serbian nationalism. It lasted until 1995 when the Dayton Peace Agreement ended the war in Bosnia and ‘recognized’ the partition of former Yugoslavia and the ensuing national states. The second ‘wave’ began soon after Dayton 1995, dealt with the NATO war over Kosovo in 1999, the post-Kosovo-war period, and it lasted until Milošević was ousted in 2000 and delivered to International Criminal Court at the Hague in 2001. The third wave commenced with Milošević’s death in 2006 and the Western process of negotiating the future of Kosovo, hitherto a province of Serbia.

The First Wave (1987-1995): Serbia as the Victim of Imperialist Geopolitics

The Slovenian war (1991), the Croatian wars (1991-1992 and 1995) and the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995) made the region famous for its second 'Balkanization'. Armed fighting and massive ethnic cleansing left approximately 100.000 people dead and millions of persons displaced. Five new and internationally recognized states emerged (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Serbia, and Macedonia). In 1993, the UN Security Council established the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia to prosecute those responsible for violations of international humanitarian law in the territory of the former Yugoslavia.

During that period (1987 – 1995) the language of foreign media and their analysts appeared to many Serbs as entirely biased, anti-Serbian placing them as the main culprit for all the atrocities, neglecting the share of the others, excluding any suffering of Serbian people, and even proposing punishment and 'cruel justice'. In those days the Serbian audience was torn apart between the 'domestic lies' in their own media and 'misunderstandings and manipulations' in the Western media. Serbians certainly lost their media war during the 'real war' but it also lost 'a fair and balanced' worldwide picture of the causes and nature of the conflict.

By having been unfairly presented in the Western media, many Serbs felt to be at war not only with the neighboring nations but also with the West in general. That was the critical mass which triggered the first wave of conspiracy theories. One can distinguish two of these: a conspiracy to break up Yugoslavia and a conspiracy to attack and conquer.

1. Long before the 1990s the plot was set to destroy Yugoslavia by inciting the separation of both Slovenia and Croatia thus to weaken the Serbian 'hegemonic' position in the Federation. The plotters were to be found in the American strategic interests in case Serbia might plunge into the post Soviet sphere of domination. In Europe it was Germany and Austria seeking the expansion of their capital markets. In addition, these countries sought revenge for their defeat in the Second World War. The main drive was the New World Order hegemony and capitalist expansion towards independent countries. 'Common executioners' were the axis connecting sometimes Masonic, sometimes Jewish intrigue, then the so-called 'Mondialists' (although nobody was able to explain what these could mean) with the USA, the Vatican, and Germany. Above all, the Vatican was influential in Slovenia and Croatia to salvage Catholicism from their enslavement in a dominantly Orthodox and Communist federation.

2. The West incited war in Bosnia in order to reduce and demote the emerging Muslim nation as a threat to Europe, yet simultaneously in order to increase and promote the emerging Muslim nation as a concession granted to powerful Islamic countries in return for strategic oil trade benefits. Some versions combined the two options.

3. The West incited war in Bosnia in order to subordinate the Serbian people to Muslim hegemony. The BBC reporting from 'all wars in the former Yugoslavia' suffered from

'absence of Serbian victims'. Western media 'estimated' that the Serbs killed between 250.000 to 300.000 people only in Bosnia, that Bosnian homes were destroyed 'at a rate of 200 per day', including 'razed villages', bombing civilians with cluster bombs, running concentration camps, and raping 60.000 women. These 'estimations' were provided without evidence but after the war a research based on population census in Bosnia calculate approximately 100.000 killed at all sides (RSD, Sarajevo 2001). Croats and Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina run 'their' concentration camps and committed war crimes as well. The Croats and the Muslims of Bosnia have been fighting each other for a good part of the war. The presence of 'Al Qaida' training camps and Jihadi warriors fighting in Bosnian army was confirmed by the US Department of State but no measures were taken with a very feeble reporting in the media. A Belgrade-based foreign journalist gives this assessment:

[T]he fact that Serbian irregulars during civil wars committed many atrocities cannot be denied and their responsibility for a massive killing in Srebrenica is today not doubted among the Serbs but Serbian civilian casualties seem to be largely neglected in [Western] media reports. It is still today unacknowledged that the largest numbers of refugees displaced from their homes – anywhere in former Yugoslavia have been Serbs from Bosnia, Krajina, and from Kosovo. Serbian propaganda accused Germany of being the chief conspirator and 'the special agent' of the Vatican and Washington. It had encouraged Slovenia and Croatia to secede, which they did on June 25, 1991. Germany was the first to recognize these new states six months before a 'collective' recognition by the EU. In this respect it is worth mentioning that state and municipal monuments were erected in Croatia to honour Hans-Dietrich Genscher, German foreign minister at the time, and various towns in Croatia had their streets named after Hans-Dietrich Genscher and his Austrian counterpart Alois Mock. A year after Croatian independence, there was this song on the Croatia pop charts, sung, notably, in German:

Danke Deutschland, meine Seele brennt!
Danke Deutschland, für das liebe Geschenk.
Danke Deutschland, vielen Dank,
wir sind jetzt nicht allein,
und die Hoffnung kommt in das zerstörte Heim.

Thank you Germany, my soul is burning!
Thank you Germany for this treasured gift.
Thank you Germany, many thanks,
we are no longer alone
and hope returns into the destroyed home

With any boundary between Realpolitik and Kitsch now firmly obfuscated in cloak-and-dagger propaganda fog, what remains as the legacy of this first wave of Serbian conspiracy theories? Perhaps it is what Charles Simić and Vladimir Pištalo (2001) quoted from Thomas Aquinas in their *Theology of Conspiracy*: "The world would be pointless without a conspiracy theory: nothing can explain evil and human misery as conspiracy does." (Simić and Pištalo 2001: p. --). At least that quote is less ethnicist than this

analysis: ‘Conspiracy theories make up a founding characteristic of the Serbian people, which allows them to look outward for the cause of suffering instead of to the people running their country’. (Živković, University of Alberta Lectures, March 2006).

As for the BBC, Laura Silber and Allan Little wrote in their widely-read book to accompany their BBC documentary, that ‘under Milošević’s stewardship’ the Serbs were ‘the key secessionists,’ as Milošević sought the ‘creation of a new enlarged Serbian state, encompassing as much territory of Yugoslavia as possible,’ his ‘politics of ethnic intolerance provok[ing] the other nations of Yugoslavia, convincing them that it was impossible to stay in the Yugoslav federation and propelling them down the road to independence.’ In another widely-read book, the BBC’s Misha Glenny wrote that ‘without question, it was Milošević who had willfully allowed the genie [of violent, intolerant nationalism] out of the bottle, knowing that the consequences might be dramatic and even bloody.’ Noel Malcolm found that by the late 1980s that ‘two processes seemed fused into one: the gathering of power into Milošević’s hands, and the gathering of the Serbs into a single political unit which could either dominate Yugoslavia or break it apart.’ For Roy Gutman, the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina ‘was the third in a series of wars launched by Serbia [...] Serbia had harnessed the powerful military machine of the Yugoslav state to achieve the dream of its extreme nationalists: Greater Serbia.’ For David Rieff, ‘even if [Croatia’s President Franjo] Tudjman had been an angel, Slobodan Milošević would still have launched his war for Greater Serbia.’ (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/>)

In a BBC commentary in 2000, Tim Judah wrote that Milošević was responsible for wars in ‘Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo: four wars since 1991, and the result of these terrible conflicts, which began with the slogan “All Serbs in One State”, is the cruelest irony.’

Reporting for the BBC in this period must have been a difficult task; once more ‘striking the right balance’ was the utmost challenge. Remaining balanced and impartial was even more difficult amidst the chaos of the transitional years, with the crumbling states of the former Federation in the processes of destruction, creation or recreation. Foreign reporters could not escape the confusion. Different truths were competing at each instance. Even if the BBC wanted to remain the ‘guardian’ of Yugoslavia (as it had seemed to be at the beginning of the civil wars), it soon became clear that the wars in the region were to last longer than anticipated and would have consequences beyond calculation.

At the beginning of the civil wars, Serbian military might was at its peak; the violence erupted on a scale never seen before, these developments quickened, and there emerged a sense of triumph in Serbia where the media did not expose much of ‘the dark matter’. The politicians Milošević and his cronies were uncompromising, rigid, and ostensibly obsessed with their mission. Journalists from all over the world reported from the region, whilst more ambitious authors started collecting material for books.

Belgrade's journalists were fully capable of distinguishing between their Western colleagues working during the war years in Serbia but also reporting from Croatia and Bosnia, as expressed here: Some of them were really courageous people going easily to war zones and reporting from there like the famous BBC correspondent Martin Bell who was wounded in Sarajevo or (also BBC) John Simpson who remained in Belgrade during the Kosovo war. But there were plenty who, notably in the nineties, lived lavishly in Belgrade on foreign currency and for little money employed local experts to travel and collect the data for them. They have never seen the war but appeared as war correspondents with conspicuous media coverage to their respective houses and audiences.

Yet for those who dared to travel to Sarajevo, then a 'global media magnet' (Arsenijević, *Enjoy Sarajevo: Politika*, 2008), it was a dangerous endeavor: Between 1992 and 1998, 27 journalists were killed in the region (CPJ, *The Committee to Protect Journalists*, 2008 (<http://www.cpj.org/deadly/index.html>)). At the same time the former Yugoslavia and its disputed republics had seen an endless and ineffective succession of foreign politicians, diplomats, negotiators, special envoys, mediators, representatives, ambassadors, and ombudsmen who tried in vain to settle a peace agreement between and among the warring but increasingly war-weary parties.

Both journalists and politicians could easily succumb to the impression of a mighty Serbian armed forces fighting against the weaker and unprotected. Importantly, Serbian conspiracy theories of those days, as said before, appeared 'out of reality'. Such a constructed plot could not be taken seriously and perhaps symbolized the defeat of Serbia in its fierce propaganda war. But equally, the achievements of Western journalism, scientific inquiry, the making of documentary films, and the literature of that period look today to be weak and of doubtful quality; these often give the impression of being exclusive, opportunistic, in most cases 'ad hoc' stringers' and parachute journalism.

Today, 'sober' political analyses in Serbia do not underestimate and neglect the Serbian role in the events and general state of confusion – at time when the first victim was often the truth. Equally disturbing is that it was emphasized that diplomatic efforts of Western diplomacy (as well as Western media reporting in its domain) had failed to understand the situation, without which there was no solution. Whether it was intentional or not, it is the matter of another, yet larger Serbian conspiracy theory that the wars were needed to advance Western strategic goals in the region. It was after all the American diplomacy (called 'bulldozer diplomacy') to design the Dayton Peace Agreement and sign the deal bringing 'some peace' yet opening new political questions and new uncertainties within Serbia to be resolved in the years to come.

The Second Wave (1995 – 2001): From Dayton to 'Milošević the Martyr'

The Post-Dayton period brought an unstable peace and the consolidation and mutual recognition of the new states emerging after the civil wars. In the winter of 1996 in

Serbia then isolated by the West. Milošević grip to power loosened, caused by massive demonstrations in Belgrade.

In 1996, Albanians formed *Kosovo Liberation Army* (KLA). The Serbian reaction involved the indiscriminate use of force against the civilian populations and caused many ethnic Albanians to flee their homes. Following an unsuccessful Rambouillet Agreement in the early months of 1999, NATO proceeded to bombard Serbia and Montenegro for more than two months, until Milošević's government submitted to their demands and withdrew its forces from Kosovo, resulting in 250 000 Serbian and other non-Albanian refugees. Since June 1999, the province has been governed by peacekeeping forces from NATO and Russia.

In October 2000 Milošević's regime collapsed after the victory of the opposition's candidate, Vojislav Koštunica who took office as Yugoslav president on October 6, 2000. On Saturday, March 31, 2001, Milošević surrendered to Yugoslav security forces from his home in Belgrade, following a recent warrant for his arrest on charges of abuse of power and corruption. On June 28 he was extradited to the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. His trial on charges of genocide in Bosnia and war crimes in Croatia and in Kosovo began at The Hague on February 12, 2002, and he died there on 11 March 2006, while his trial was still ongoing.

New conspiracy theories emerged. The prevalent 'general' conspiracies expressing Western imperialism and post-cold war geo-strategic positioning were renewed but 'with more bones and flesh' and appeared as such:

1. The NATO bombing of Serbia and Montenegro was to redefine the role of the alliance after the Cold War and to take ground on Serbian soil and create a puppet state (Kosovo) as a strategic ally in 21st century Europe
2. The establishment of the International Court at the Hague and Milošević's trial serve as the justification of the Western role in the disintegration of Yugoslavia as well as punishment of Serbia for its share in the regional affairs. It is simply a Political Arm of NATO.
3. War is big business: weapon industry had to get rid of old projectiles and acquire the orders for new ones.
4. Post-Milošević's Serbia was permanently kept in turmoil and in poverty and its democratic processes systematically obstructed by the West via blackmailing (for the war fugitives Karadžić and Mladić), travel restrictions, and biased reporting in the media.
5. The death of the Prime Minister, Serbian Zoran Djindjić, in 2003 was caused by 'Serbian sniper rifle and a Western finger on its trigger'.

However, this time something had changed. The Serbs, who in the previous period produced a great number of weak, inconsistent, and unsustainable conspiracy theories – sometimes bordering on the fantastic – now have a set of plot assumptions that were not entirely theirs. Some voices from the West opposing mainstream mass media journalism and challenging the policies of their own governments did express their doubts about the humanitarian intentions of the NATO campaign as well as critical opinions on the role of

the International Court and its processes. These concerns were somehow in accordance with the Serbian 'conspiracy' views on the respective events. It may be also said that the informants corresponding in this research have demonstrated understanding of global and local affairs and how these are translated and represented in the modern corporate journalism.

With the international war, first on European soil after 1945, the violent expression of Western interventionism, and military involvement in Balkan's affairs all of a sudden was seen as the 'conspiracy against liberty' for many 'independent intellectuals and media'. For the first time in relation to Serbia the West was not unison in openly or covertly expressing the conventional ideas on Serbs and their 'guilt' including their former leader Milošević regularly branded as 'the butcher of the Balkans'. Whether these opposing voices came (as many Serbs would wish) as 'arriving at the right point' or the inconsistency – if not hypocrisy of Western politics in the Balkans – became too difficult to stomach for those, as the Belgrade journalist say who still 'do think with their heads'.

These surprising 'voices of disagreement' were not seen among Serbian audiences as 'support' of the 'suddenly awakened consciousness of the Western mind'. Rather (majority of Belgrade's informants): 'there is a domino effect' that started with the Kosovo War here then ties 9/11 with the American and NATO interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many [in the West] may feel that the domino effect was put into motion with the Kosovo War, legitimizing for the West the use of violence around the globe. Even if this sounds self-centered, the Serbs, remembering the 72-day bombardment of Yugoslavia in 1999, think a dangerous precedent and the emergence of humanitarian interventionism 'we are bombing you for your own good' did make an impact on a 'still thinking part of the mankind'.

It is precisely the way in which the mass media presented the Kosovo crisis that split public opinion in the West. NATO propaganda – by rule void of 'objective assessments' became prominent in the reporting. The result is that the war over Kosovo was in mass media covered as a war for human values and protection of the weak. The BBC's coverage is summarized here in a few main points: In the mid-1990s an ethnic Albanian guerrilla movement, the Kosovo Liberation Army, stepped up its attacks on Serb targets. The attacks precipitated a major, and brutal, Yugoslav military crackdown.

Slobodan Milosevic's rejection of an internationally-brokered deal to end the crisis, and the persecution of Kosovo Albanians, led to the start of NATO air strikes against targets in Kosovo and Serbia in March 1999. Meanwhile, a campaign of ethnic cleansing against Kosovo Albanians was initiated by Serbian forces. Hundreds of thousands of refugees fled to Albania, Macedonia and Montenegro. Thousands of people died in the conflict. Serbian forces were driven out in the summer of 1999 and the UN took over the administration of the province. (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country_profiles/3524092.stm)

This factual reporting is a model to be found in hundreds of BBC articles of those days with only minor critical reflections over Alliance's intervention. In fact the language of these reports was apparently similar to the language and rhetoric of the State Department

and Foreign Office. But the real events during Kosovo campaign were so blatant that they could not escape 'out of main stream media' criticism. The public opinion in the West became dangerously split about the campaign and the articles expressing doubts poured.

It was Slavoj Žižek who, at the beginning of campaign protested 'Against The Double Blackmail' (New Left Review 234, March-April 1999) stating that:

[I]t is not comforting to see the NATO forces intervene not for any specific economic-strategic interests, but simply because a country is cruelly violating the elementary human rights of an ethnic group? Is not this the only hope in our global era — to see some internationally acknowledged force as a guarantee that all countries will respect a certain minimum of ethical (and, hopefully, also health, social, ecological) standards? However, the situation is more complex, and this complexity is indicated already in the way NATO justifies its intervention: the violation of human rights is always accompanied by the vague, but ominous reference to "strategic interests."

Now, the conspiracy theory about 'strategic interest' could not be reduced to a homegrown Serbian product. Many other authors criticized NATO intervention such as Noam Chomsky (in *The New Military Humanism: Lessons from Kosovo*, 1999), Rebecca Grant (*Nine Myths about Kosovo*, 2000), Edward S. Herman and David Peterson (*The Dismantling of Yugoslavia: A Study in Inhumanitarian Intervention and a Western Liberal-Left Intellectual and Moral Collapse*, 2001), Geoffrey Goodman (*Too many truths*, 1999), Richard Keeble (*A Balkan birthday for NATO*, 1999), Tariq Ali (*Springtime for NATO*, 1999), Joseph Pharah (*The real war crimes*, 1999). In Western countries, opposition to NATO's intervention was mainly from the libertarian right, and from most of the far left. In Britain, the war was opposed by many prominent conservative figures including former UK Foreign Secretary Sir Malcolm Rifkind, former Chancellor of the Exchequer Norman Lamont, and journalists Peter Hitchens and Simon Heffer, whereas opposition on the left was confined to *The Morning Star* newspaper and left wing MPs like Tony Benn and Alan Simpson. A critical mass of opposing attitudes may be summarized as:

The breakup of Yugoslavia provided the fodder for what may have been the most misrepresented series of major events over the past twenty years. The journalistic and historical narratives that were imposed upon these wars have systematically distorted their nature, and were deeply prejudicial, downplaying the external factors that drove Yugoslavia's breakup while selectively exaggerating and misrepresenting the internal factors. Perhaps no civil wars—and Yugoslavia suffered multiple civil wars across several theaters, at least two of which remain unresolved—have ever been harvested as cynically by foreign powers to establish legal precedents and new categories of international duties and norms. Nor have any other civil wars been turned into such a proving ground for the related notions of "humanitarian intervention" and the "right [or responsibility] to protect." Yugoslavia's conflicts were not so much mediated by foreign powers as they were inflamed and exploited by them to advance policy goals. The result was a tsunami of lies and misrepresentations in whose wake the world is still reeling. (Herman and Peterson, 2001)

A brief summary of political narratives here serves to see how the presentation of the war in the global media (and BBC – after all the United Kingdom was effectively at war with Serbia!) badly departed from what was going on during bombing campaign. First of the fierce criticism concerns the number of killed during the campaign. Already by March 1999, the combination of fighting and the targeting of civilians had left an estimated 1,500-2,000 civilians and combatants dead (Human Rights Watch) Final estimates of the casualties are still unavailable for either side. Some estimates (NIN, 2006) claim about 5,000 dead which is far away from ‘official’ NATO sources.

President Clinton of the United States, and his administration, were accused of inflating the number of Kosovar Albanians killed by Serbians. Clinton's Secretary of Defense William Cohen, giving a speech, said, “The appalling accounts of mass killing in Kosovo and the pictures of refugees fleeing Serb oppression for their lives makes it clear that this is a fight for justice over genocide.” (William Cohen, April 7, 1999: Secretary Cohen's Press Conference at NATO Headquarters. U.S. Department of Defense). In addition, the New York Times reported, “On April 19, the State Department said that up to 500,000 Kosovar Albanians were missing and feared dead.” Erlanger, Steven (November 11, 1999: “Early Count Hints at Fewer Kosovo Deaths”. The New York Times, p. A6)

Tony Blair invoked the Holocaust and ‘the spirit of the Second World War.’ The British press took its cue. ‘Flight from genocide,’ said the Daily Mail. ‘Echoes of the Holocaust,’ chorused The Sun and The Mirror.

One year later, the International War Crimes Tribunal (ICTY), a body effectively set up by NATO, announced that the final count of bodies found in Kosovo's ‘mass graves’ was 2,788. This included combatants on both sides and Serbs and Roma murdered by the Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army. In June 2000 the Red Cross reported that 3,368 civilians (2,500 Albanians, 400 Serbs, and 100 Roma) were still missing, nearly one year after the conflict. NATO's destruction of only 14 Yugoslav army tanks compares with its bombing of 372 centers of industry, including the *Zastava* car factory, leaving hundreds of thousands jobless. Not one foreign or privately owned factory was bombed. So called ‘collateral damages’ inflicted by NATO surpass the number of Albanian civilians killed by the Serbian forces. NATO, to be sure, only makes ‘mistakes’ whereas Serbia carries out ‘atrocities.’

(Statement of the Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site
24 May 1999: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/may1999/stat-m24.shtml>)

During the bombing the BBC anchor Wark interviewed general, Wesley Clark, the NATO commander. (BBC World: June 17). The Serbian city of Niš – had just been sprayed with American cluster bombs, killing women, old people and children caught in the open: the horrific handiwork of one of NATO's ‘precision-guided’ missiles, of which only 2 per cent hit military targets. Wark asked not a single question about this, or about any civilian deaths.

That the BBC, like most of the Anglo-American media, reports the fate of whole societies according to their usefulness to ‘us,’ the euphemism for western power,

and works diligently to minimise the culpability of British governments in great crimes, is self-evident and certainly unconspiratorial. It is simply part of a rich tradition. (Myth and Reality by John Pilger, December 5, 2003).

On April 29, 1999 Yugoslavia filed a complaint at the International Court of Justice at The Hague against ten NATO member countries (Belgium, Germany, France, Great Britain, Italy, Canada, The Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and the USA). The Court did not decide upon the case because Yugoslavia was not a member of the UN during the war.

Similar debates occurred after Milošević's deportation to the Hague, his 'controversial' trial and his death. Here Serbian conspiracy theories (as sourced from NIN and Politika in 2006) expressed that a massive trial of Milosevic, with 295 prosecution witnesses and 49,191 pages of courtroom transcripts, lasting five years failed to produce a single credible piece of evidence that Milošević had spoken disparagingly of non-Serb "nations" or ordered any killings that might fall under the category of war crimes. Another idea, insinuating 'tacit murder', is that Milošević's illness was deliberately neglected 'to allow him to die'. This is tied to a larger conspiracy theory that, if allowed to present his case,

Milošević would attempt to establish that NATO's attack on Yugoslavia was aggressive, thus being a war crime under international law; and that, while supporting the KLA, NATO was aware that they had practiced and intended to continue practicing genocide. If a prima facie case for either claim were established, the ICTY would be legally obliged under its terms of reference to prepare an indictment against the leaders of most of the NATO countries, even though the prosecutor had already concluded an 'inquiry' against the NATO leaders. NATO spokesman Jamie Shea commented on it:

NATO countries are those that have provided the finance to set up the Tribunal, we are amongst the majority financiers, and of course to build a second chamber so that prosecutions can be speeded up so let me assure that we and the Tribunal are all one on this, we want to see war criminals brought to justice and I am certain that when Justice Arbour goes to Kosovo and looks at the facts she will be indicting people of Yugoslav nationality and I do not anticipate any others at this stage.(sourced from Köchler, 2003:166)

These controversies again sparked a heated debate in the West and while major media remained silent (or simply used their old patterns of implying guilt both to the Serbs and Milošević) or "highlighted the bizarre conspiracy theories, purported international plots, prejudices and fantasies that are spun in dizzying complexity by political leaders here" (Chris Hedges in New York Times in January 1997. The 'alternative' media and authors severely criticized the NATO intervention as well as the International Court in respect to Milošević's death. These fell on 'curious ears' in Serbia and the silent response was 'have we been talking like this for ages'. Only then it was 'discovered' that maybe Serbian propaganda war of the early nineties was not lost and that the chance of establishing a more balanced opinion and 'truth' about historical legacy of Serbia after all the wars in the Balkans still exist. That is how the new 'conspiracy theories coalition' between East and West came into being: the Western critical voices about the region

began to be presented in Serbia by establishing the discourse of 'alternative thought', that is to systematically spread, publish, and republish all those Western voices opposing the 'official truth' as expressed in their dominant media.

In this period (that is: during the second wave of Serbian conspiracy theories) it seemed as though the West had lost its patience towards Serbia, and that the mainstream media were given the signal to attach much more weight to Western diplomacy, and to take a harsher attitude towards Serbia. It was the time in which Milošević had received some support as a 'factor of stability' until the NATO war took place. After he was ousted in 2000, Western media gave the impression that it was simply a matter of time before his delivery to the International Court.

The BBC reporting adopted that approach and allowed more 'parachuters' to engage the region. Some of them were even 'allowed' to describe their own emotional accounts and experiences of the crisis in Serbia.

The Third Wave (2006 – 2008): New West – East Media Management in Serbia

The emergence of rich and solid bodies of critical thought in the West prompted many Serbs to create a new 'post-Milošević' but 'pre-Kosovo independence' theory, yet again a theory that traced the conspirator to 'the West'. This time, and for the first time with good reason perhaps, the conspiracy theory concerned the West's interest in oil pipelines. As so often, the beauty of conspiracy theories resides in their potency that even the most contradictory evidence can be folded into a new conspiracy version. Milošević's sudden death while on trial was, perhaps, a result of deliberate negligence since it became impossible to construct a juridical argument for the necessary finding of guilt. Now, after the 'main obstacle' to the unlimited expansion of NATO was removed, the question of the BBC's Serbian and ex-Yugoslav audiences was, why the settlement of Kosovo had to include 'full independence'. The conspiracy theory built upon this independence 'urge' is found to be in geo-strategic post Cold War positioning, namely that Kosovo was given 'supervised' independence as an American puppet state which would be a crucial player in the construction of new oil pipelines that would circumvent Serbia.

Geographically, Kosovo lies at the center of a critical pipeline route for transporting the largely untapped oil and gas resources of Central Asia to markets in the West. The traditional East-West route from the landlocked Caspian Sea has been via the Bosphorus Straits. However, this route has been increasingly unable to cope with demand. The question of 'Bosphorus by-pass routes' is inextricably connected to the strategy championed by the US of building new pipelines that circumvent Russia and Iran.

Involved in the reintegration of the territory of the former USSR into world capitalism is the absorption, by massive Western transnational companies, of trillions of dollars in valuable raw materials that are vital to the imperialist powers. The greatest untapped oil reserves in the world are located in the former Soviet republics bordering the Caspian Sea (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan,

Turkmenistan). These resources are now being divided among the major capitalist countries. This is the fuel that is feeding renewed militarism and must lead to new wars of conquest by the imperialist powers against local opponents, as well as ever-greater conflicts among the imperialists themselves (World Socialist Website: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2002/dec2002/isra-d03.shtml>)

The Serbian media indiscriminately exploited this 'agreement' between Serbian conspiracy theories and similar assessments in the Western alternative media as though 'much of the West' was on the Serbian side and the Serbian media was speaking in their name. The establishment of 'organized' presentation and enormous public debates based on the Western alternative thinking was, by chance, initiated by the BBC itself.

While the 'official' BBC World and its BBC Serbian remain calm and unmoved in response to a 'global' debate, the Corporation (in its 'total production') did 'allow' some critical voices to be heard, namely the series of documentaries by Adam Curtis. He is a British television documentary maker who has during the course of his television career worked as a writer, producer, director and narrator. He currently works for BBC Current Affair and certainly is a 'mainstream' documentary filmmaker who dares to go deeper than most.

His work explores the concept and definition of freedom, specifically 'how a simplistic model of human beings as self-seeking, almost robotic, creatures led to today's idea of freedom.' In his 2004 series of three one-hour films *The Power of Nightmares: The Rise of the Politics of Fear* Curtis compare the rise of the American Neo-Conservative movement and the radical Islamist movement, making comparisons on their origins and noting strong similarities between the two. More controversially, it argues that the threat of radical Islamism as a massive, sinister organized force of destruction, specifically in the form of al-Qaeda, is in fact a myth perpetrated by politicians in many countries particularly American Neo-Conservatives in an attempt to unite and inspire their people following the failure of earlier, more utopian ideologies.

The Power of Nightmares has been widely presented and praised by all audiences in Serbia. Following the urge to hear similar voices, most Serbian media started special programs, columns, and rubrics entirely devoted to presenting the observations of Curtis and like-minded sources. Radio Belgrade Two established a unique weekly program Atlantis – Brave New World 'specialized' in presenting news, commentaries, and thinking of those who oppose the official line of thought in the West.

Although some critical assessments and deeper analyses were produced via BBC reporting on Serbia, the overall picture – as received by the Serbian audiences – remained grim and 'too supportive' for the Western policies in the region. This, in particular, came to the fore with the Western solution for Kosovo and the push for its independence. The view of major Western powers was fully adopted to which any critical opposition was impossible to find and read. The simplification – perhaps seen as pragmatism – was the main drive and, again, the procedures 'learned' during the Kosovo war were exercised. After all, as it was stated in Belgrade's media: 'the second Cold War just started' (Politika, February 06 2008) and Serbia found itself 'allied' with Russia. Given the

fiercely anti-Russian campaign, for which the BBC is famous, would they give any credit to Serbia in terms of an impartial approach in such a situation?

Still, this is not to advertise Serbian conspiracy theories, for Byford is certainly right in stating that: Conspiracy theories, which marked the reign of Slobodan Milošević, are still persistent in Serbia and will remain a symbol of anti-Western sentiment and populist political culture. Serbian conflict with international community had promoted conspiracy theories into the main tool of nationalist rhetoric and this rhetoric is still strong in Serbia. (Byford, 2006)

Additional support for this position comes from Bennet, whom we quoted above:

As Serbia challenges the might of the West, many Serbs boast that their history proves that despite the imbalance in firepower, they will never be vanquished. The trouble is that the version of the past recounted in Belgrade does not stand up to scrutiny. Serbia is not only fighting NATO, it is also at war with history. (Christopher Bennet for the Greek Helsinki Monitor in 1999)

Media Pluralism within the BBC's Serbian Service: Impartiality by Ventriloquism

We have diagnosed a constant and general disbelief in the impartiality of the Western main-stream media towards the Yugoslav and now Serbian 'problem', a disbelief that has been shaping up during the last 20 years of a permanent crisis – is so clearly articulated that it did not make a point in discussions. What really matters is the BBC as a source by which the audiences assess and measure, feel, and get to know what is the political pulse of the West. For them the Corporation is anyway an agent in their conspiracy theories, yet that does not lessen its attractiveness to the full-time information seekers in former Yugoslavia.

A major reason for this assessment is in the way in which the BBC covers the events. It is the BBC's mainframe of events where impartiality comes into play as 'when in doubt leave it out'. The doubt is not whether a certain event has occurred but how the information about that event would impact the general position of the BBC towards Western values, politics and institutions. For the audiences the presence of such 'leftouts' or 'blind spots' and lack of criticism is palpable and fits into their conspiracy theory about the role played by the BBC.

Among many discussed 'left-outs' two examples remain central: the sanctity of international institutions, namely The International Crime Tribunal in the Hague and the UN Mission in Kosovo.

The first example put forth by the Serbian audience is the absence of any critical reflections on the International Court, notably after Milošević's suspicious death, but more recently after Florence Hartman, the former spokeswoman of the Tribunal and fired

in 2007, has published her memoirs emphasizing that ‘the Institution has never been up to its honorable duty’ because of an atmosphere of intrigue and of ‘a permanent conflict between the Anglo-Saxon and Francophone lobbies’ including internal sabotages, nepotism and open intermingling of foreign intelligence services’ (Politika, January 16 2008). Her book ‘inflamed the Balkans and was widely discussed in Serbia yet on BBC’s programs only two little and feeble pieces of news appeared on what was considered a serious scandal within an ‘honorable’ UN institution.

Neither did the BBC ever report on the corruption scandals in Kosovo going on for years and involving high ranking British UN officials and the former UN High Representative of Kosovo Bernard Coughner – today the French foreign minister. The sources of this scandal have not been found in the Serbian conspiracy theories but in the Revision Commission of the UN itself. Mr Coughner saw to it that the French company ‘Alcatel’ obtained a contract for providing Kosovo with mobile telephone communications, although the German firm ‘Siemens’ had offered more favorable conditions. The governor blocked the legal UN procedure to decide on dialing code for Kosovo, decided to be the same as Monaco’s – states the UN Report published in Sweden (Dagens Nyheter, 1354: July 20th 2007). In addition the Serbian media claimed that ‘many goods supplied to Kosovo on his orders as humanitarian aid are sold at commercial prices with Mr Coughner having his share of the money’. This scandal seems to be never reported about in the West as other cases of corruption of Kosovo and its international institutions: ‘Sixdigit crime in Kosovo is local, seven digit-crime belongs to the UN’.

This contributed to an instant Serbian (and wider) conspiracy theory on why some Western powers were ready to recognize Kosovo’s independence only a day after its declaration: America, so the prevailing assessments, did it because of its oil strategy, France to support its corporations, Austria and Germany to express their vengeance towards Serbia – a victorious power in World War Two, and Great Britain because it was told to do so by the USA.

It is however fair to say that the ‘absence of events’ (informing on them) and the lack of critical analyses is not absolute. The Corporation does allow even ‘discomforting’ voices to be transmitted. But these are given in minimum dosages like from the smallest ‘bottle’, expertly assuring that the impact will be made though not obviously and apparently. The form of the BBC’s impartiality is here supported with its ‘minimalism’ on reporting and commenting the facts which actually may disturb the development of Western endeavors in this region.

Such is a unique example of breaching the ‘rules of sanctity’ or softening the censorship is the analysis by an article by Shane Brighton, a young historian publishing on the BBC’s officially endorsed history web page – <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/>, which reviews the precedents of war crimes trials since Napoleon, and shows how the mechanisms of the courts reflect the changing nature of conflict. The author deems NATO intervention ‘ambiguous under international law’ lacking a UN mandate and breaching Yugoslav sovereignty:

It is perhaps in recognition of these ambiguities that the charges against Milošević have been widened to include crimes of genocide during the Bosnian war and crimes against humanity in Croatia. His prosecution remains far from certain and the future legacy of the Hague Tribunal can only be the subject of speculation informed by attention to the changing nature of the international order. [...]The continued use of war crimes tribunals as a means to international order corresponds with the rise of liberal democracy, most notably British and American, to the centre of world power.

Shane Brighton insinuates that ‘...economic, cultural and political independence...is subject as never before to the whim of the powerful’ coming close what constitutes the Serbian conspiracy theory about the Tribunal end even more:

The notion of 'political justice': the use of legal institutions and processes to create, sustain and legitimate a particular political order perhaps offers a better framework. Whatever the legal quality of the Hague process (a matter that has divided experts), Slobodan Milosevic's indictment and the institutional framework in which he will be judged reflect the political interests and visions of those sponsoring the Tribunal, the same powers against which his final battles were fought. Their efforts to globalize law will only succeed through popular perceptions of its legitimacy, perceptions that are intimately tied up with the political equity of the international order.

Yet this remains a lonely example or a sort of ‘agreement’ if not a distant, reluctant, and feeble BBC’s reflection and reaction to what has been left out of its frame of events. Speaking of the second ‘left-out’, Kosovo corruption, almost every report from the region does indeed contain the problem of corruption but more as a general mentioning of the issue without revealing the ‘untouchables’ involved.

This journalism of the BBC has been scrutinized by the audiences citing the numerous examples, noticeably used to support all the conspiracy theories emerging at the time of any given event and thereafter. Ominously, the ‘support’ for the Serbian conspiracy theories is found everywhere in BBC reporting – the same conclusion is made when the event is covered in a ‘biased’ – factual way, where there is no coverage at all, or when the BBC indeed provides a critical commentary, unusual for its regulated way and its firm guidelines and rules of engagement. Strategies of reporting – as classified by informants – are here types of journalism of which we list the most mentioned:

Documentary journalism [*dokumentarno novinarstvo*] – although presented in the larger branches of BBC production and not in the BBC World this ‘successful and objective accounts’ are the previously discussed Curtis’ series *The Power of Nightmares: The Rise of the Politics of Fear* but not in the documentaries *The Death of Yugoslavia* (1995), which charted Milosevic's rise to power and was not seen as fair and balanced by the Serbian audiences. These six programs for BBC TWO won 16 major awards. The series was broadcast in more than 50 countries and, evocatively, repeated all over the world during the 1999 Kosovo war. These series are seen by the Serbian audiences as ‘masterful propaganda’.

Critical journalism [*kritičko novinarstvo*] – it is very rare but not entirely absent as it is above cited article of Shane Brighton.

Factual journalism [*činjenično novinarstvo*] – contains politically neutral statements delivering the news and following the chain of events with always the same background. Such is for example reporting on Kosovo by Ray Furlong (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/europe/7222227.stm>).

For example, Ray Furlog refers to corruption but does not say much about it:

The EU is planning to send hundreds of police officers to safeguard the Serb community, and judicial officials will deal with a justice system devastated by corruption and intimidation of witnesses.

It informs about the telecom business by the French but does not provide any explanation on why:

The cars have different number plates and they use Serbia's international dialing code. Kosovo uses Monaco's.

Another example is to use the prepared or prefabricated statements as news as in the reporting of Paul Reynolds (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/europe/7249317.stm>):

The re-emergence of the word West, with its Cold War implications of an almost permanent division with Russia, is a sign of how badly relations have deteriorated over the past few years.

Even more despised are examples of emotional diary journalism (*emocionalno novinarstvo*) such as these musings by the BBC World Service's Allan Little. The author is given space to exert some literary and philosophical concerns:

The arc of Milosevic's life reads like a character written by Goethe. There was something Faustian in the pact he made with the twin demons of Balkan nationalism and war. They kept him in power for a while. War was his power base. But they destroyed him in the end. [...] And now the Serbs - and Serbia itself - are paying the price of that disastrous experiment in ethnic supremacy. (http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr//2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/)

Allan Little is also prone to make statements such as:

The EU has a long track record exporting democracy. (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/europe/7247428.stm>)

This standard is here also extended to the journalist's personal life and emotions as Nick Thorpe reported from Belgrade:

Looking out of my hotel window in new Belgrade, surrounded on all sides by tall rectangular housing blocks, I feel like a Lilliputian, the tiny people created by the writer, Jonathan Swift in his novel "Gulliver's Travels". Surrounded by giant tombstones.

(http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_corresp/4817238.stm)

Such BBC reporting widely discussed among the informants with a touch of ridicule reminds many of the CNN's infamous Christiane Amanpour and her reporting during the long Yugoslav crisis labeling her to be 'the steam engine of American propaganda'. Her mostly unsubstantiated reports combined with ignorance and arrogance are, to this day, for the Serbs an example of how some Western media used bad taste and obvious lies in 'blurring' the eyes of its Western audience with the most ridiculous and fantastic statements about Serbia and the Serbs as if they 'had the world monopoly on violence'. This might be considered a biased statement but one can hardly avoid to at least wonder about how such BBC stories about 'giant tombstones', Lilliputian journalists, or Balkanic 'twin demons' could ever appear on BBC programs and its world news? Being full of emotions but vacuous in meaning such news-reporting work seriously discredits the Corporation's commitment to impartiality!

Furthermore, emotions and emotional statements, heavily in contrast to the BBC's aura of impartiality, are easily detected in what the informants dubbed as expert journalism [*ekspertno novinarstvo*] offering political commentaries and analyses, which however, 'allow' the author to express his views, and to judge the events. Such are the statements made in a series of articles which appeared both on BBC World and BBC Serbian by Tim Judah, the author of *Kosovo: War and Revenge* and *The Serbs: History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*, currently the BBC's Balkan specialist. He provided the historical account on Yugoslavia's crisis in a series of articles (http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/yugoslavia_06.shtml) from the times of 'unhappy kingdom' to 'a noble idea' through Tito's Yugoslavia with its 'own brand of socialism, and a society far more open than that of its communist neighbours'. Yet it was an 'illusion built on the shaky foundations of massive western loans'. Judah then explained the downfall of the country entirely putting the blame on Slobodan Milošević hinting that there was 'a cruel justice' when the Serbs faced defeat.

Multiple sources journalism [*novinarstvo različitih izvora*] is when the BBC gives weight to other voices. BBC Serbian offers the daily column *pregled štampe* [the Press Reviews], bringing selected and excerpts from the British press. Here some critical voices can be found, even 'opposing' the policies of the BBC towards Serbia.

Washington stubbornly insists that the independence for Kosovo is the best for the stability of the Balkans but leaves to European Union to guarantee that stability (Financial Times, February 12th 2008).

Kosovo is in a state of paranoia due to the extreme Islamic movements [...] New mosques are erected and the old mosques are renovated, all financed by Saudi Arabia (Daily Telegraph, February 13th 2008).

In the next 72 hours Great Britain, America, and most EU countries will support the slaughter of a small and sovereign country [...] Kosovo is jumping into the unknown as an extreme example of Blair's school of interventionism (Independent, February 15th 2008).

The reality of the independent Kosovo soon after the celebrations will soon become obnoxious even for those who fought for it (Financial Times, February 15th 2008).

So called Western liberal interventionism has already caused the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Guardian, February 28th 2008).

BBC's Serbian Service redeemed its claims of impartiality by a form of ventriloquism: the 'other voices' often seriously depart from the tone of the BBC's own production, yet they are regularly published perhaps attempting to achieve the idea that 'everyone be treated as an equal' (Dworkin, 1977: 227).

There are still many controversies about the position of the BBC not only in relation to the Serbian audiences but to the West as well. For the Serbs the Corporation is presiding over the apogee of the Western military, political and economic power. But for the West the reputation of the BBC was recently doubted as the 'Bush and Blair Corporation' as put by the British anti-Iraq war MP George Galloway (Edge Hill University, 12 April 2006: George Galloway Attacks 'Blair's Bloody Legacy').

The BBC is said as being 'out of touch with large swathes of the public and is guilty of self-censoring subjects that the Corporation finds unpalatable' ("BBC accused of institutional 'trendy left-wing bias'". Evening Standard (18 June 2007)

Finally:

Impartiality was a principle certainly: a principle to be suspended whenever the establishment was under threat. And that principle has been upheld ever since. (The Invisible Government, John Pilger, Information Clearing House, Speech delivered at the Chicago Socialism 2007 Conference on Saturday June 16 2007).

The BBC may be accused of contributing to the culture of fear if not to moral panic but – to finally return to the Serbian audiences its impartiality appears as a diplomacy and indeed the serious assessment of all the ingredients stirred into a cocktail as a mid-way solution between the two poles of political rhetoric – the one of a Corporation and the one of a larger discourse formed in the West as a response to the Yugoslav crisis. If we take this argument and now again briefly return into the BBC's alchemic laboratory of impartiality with twelve bottles that make that cocktail, then, there must be a thirteenth bottle, the one that contains an anti-deception sedative – a very few drops of it will give an impression of impartiality because other voices are allowed to be heard.

This research shows that most informants, who are regular BBC users, respect the BBC programs although with an overwhelming critical and skeptical stance. Their interest

originates in the prevalent culture of gathering information from multiple sources, in discovering captivatingly told stories as well as in attaining knowledge about world affairs and the BBC's coverage of the events in their own region. But, most of all, the Serbian BBC listenership uses the broadcaster to prove to themselves and to the others the very existence of many conspiracy theories, designed, constructed, and voiced both in Serbia and in the West.

Many crises and defeats to which Serbia had been exposed for a long time had certainly been the oxygen for conspiracy theories. After the first wave of the 'initial' Serbian conspiracy theories – often absurd if not lunatic – came fueling 'help' from the West. Independent intellectuals and leftist media criticized Western policies in the Balkans. The whole 'discourse of doubt' had somehow become fertilized offering a new dynamism by importing from the West their own conspiracy theories.

By examining these conspiracy theories, the majority of informants too easily pontificated about western policies and leaders but failed to examine the mediocrity and dilettantisms of theirs or to point out the wrongdoings of their own, above all Serbian moral indifference to violence and sufferings of people involved in the Yugoslav civil wars of the nineties. Certainly neither all imaginable conspiracy theories nor the role of the BBC in its 'impartial' reporting on the region can be blamed for the spiraling violence experienced in the region during the decade 1990 to 2000. Nevertheless, the BBC programs including its vernacular service BBC Serbian, even a decade after, never gained the trust of its Serbian audience. Instead, it served merely to increase the listeners' beliefs in the Western conspiracy against Serbia and is commonly seen as the propaganda means of the United Kingdom, the European Union, and NATO.

With this general and irremovable distrust but nevertheless interest in BBC, the idea here was not to weigh the pros and cons of the Corporation's impartiality but to assess the phenomenon entitled here: why is the Serbian audience still listening to the BBC if not trusting it at all. We demonstrated how the BBC managed to win over its skeptical audiences but not by its impartiality. What counted for the Serbian BBC audience was less *what* the BBC broadcast but *how* it did so. The use of its advanced technological potential, its simplicity, minimalism, and beautified presentation creating an interesting story were the key ingredients in passing the BBC message to its skeptical audience. It was the presentation, not the content, which won the audience and to this day, in spite of all doubts and skepticism of the Serbian audiences, the BBC is still considered to be the best Western media.

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