

Crisis in Kosovo

TV News Coverage of the NATO Strikes on Yugoslavia

Major findings:

■ **Balancing Act** Opinions on U.S. policy have been balanced overall.

■ **The China Card** But the coverage shifted from 3 to 2 positive to 6 to 1 negative after NATO bombed the Chinese embassy.

■ **Antiwar Sources** Most sources have opposed both air strikes and ground troops.

■ **Prowar CBS** CBS featured the most prowar coverage.

■ **Beating Bush Again** Bill Clinton's press was better than George Bush's during the Gulf War.

■ **What War?** Since the Littleton school shootings coverage of the Kosovo war dropped by 44%.

How have the networks covered NATO's air war against Slobodan Milosevic's military? What were the major topics of discussion and how does the coverage differ from coverage of the war in 1991 against Iraq? This issue of the *Media Monitor* looks at the topics and debate on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts during the two months of hostilities from March 24 through May 25, 1999.

From March 2, 1998 (when the crisis in Kosovo first appeared on the nightly news radar) through March 23, 1999, 359 Kosovo stories aired on the broadcast networks' evening news programs. Since NATO's air strikes began on March 24, 1999, the networks have aired an additional 972 stories on the war. By comparison, the 1990-91 Persian Gulf crisis generated 2,650 prewar stories and 1,733 stories during the six weeks the allies were at war. There is one reason for the lower profile of the current hostilities: since the high school shooting in Littleton, CO on April 20, the Kosovo war has had to compete for airtime with coverage of youth violence. Prior to the shooting, the networks averaged 23 stories per night. During the following three weeks, which included the May 7 bombing of the Chinese embassy, they averaged eleven stories per night. Since then, the coverage has dropped to only seven stories per night.

The leading topic in network news stories since the bombing began was the air war (504 stories). Other major topics included the plight of the Kosovar refugees (254 stories), NATO war strategy (242

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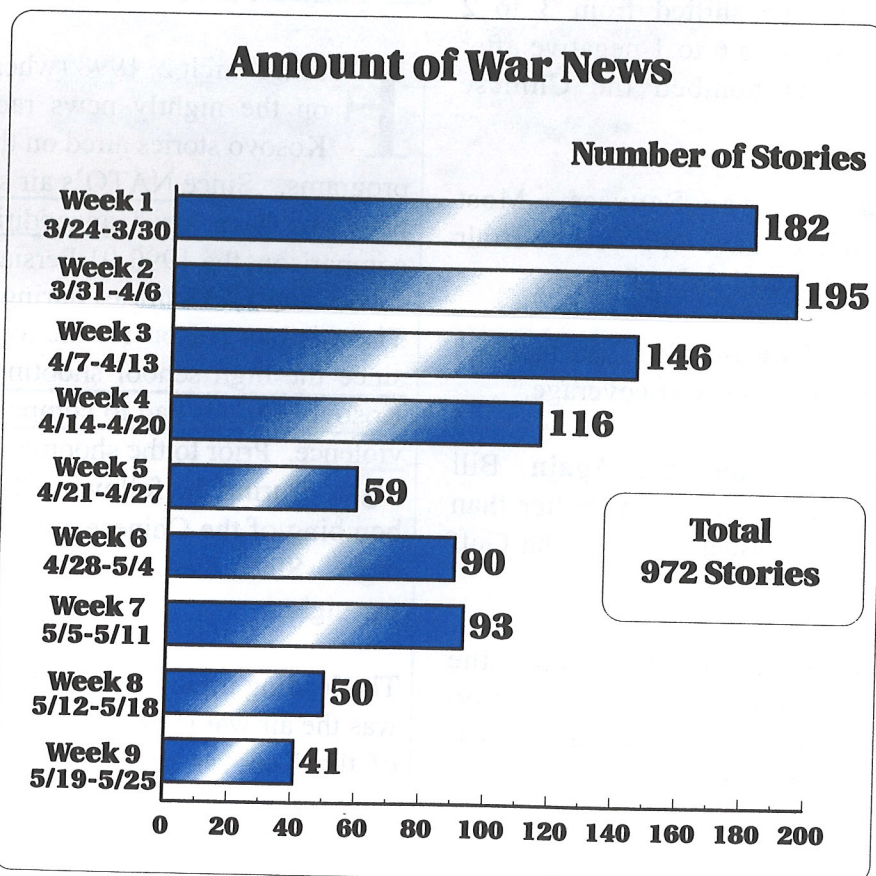
war was the subject of 337 stories and more than 11 hours of coverage. Most of the initial coverage focused on the air war (131 stories). Other topics included NATO strategy (49 stories) and the Serbs' alleged ethnic cleansing campaign (43). (Note: More than one topic may have been featured in any given story.)

Week Two: March 31-April 6
The coverage increased to 195 stories in the second week of bombing. The air campaign remained the main focus (92 stories) of network attention, but the plight of the Kosovar refugees was covered almost as heavily (85 stories). NATO strategy (57 stories) and Serb ethnic cleansing (42 stories) remained prominent topics. It was in week two that the three American servicemen were taken prisoners by the Serbs; that event was the topic of 26 stories.

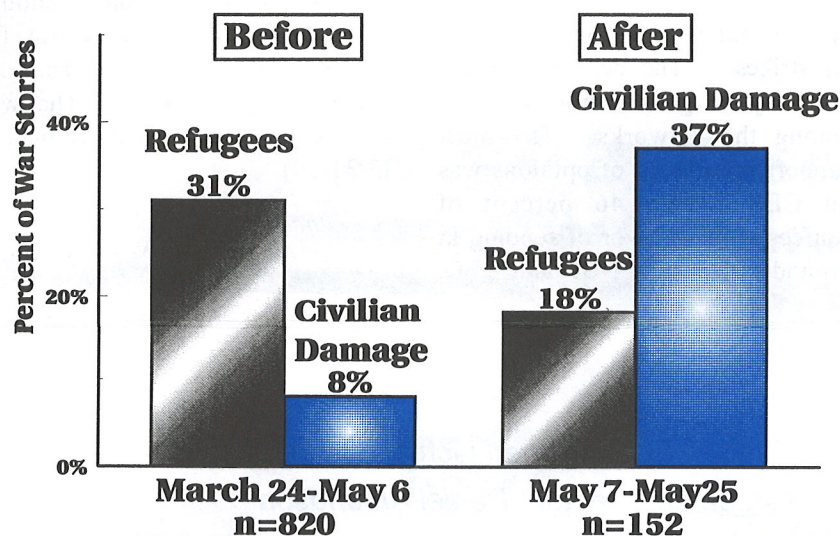
stories), and the ethnic cleansing activities of Serb forces in Kosovo (156 stories). While discussions of the refugees and ethnic cleansing were consistent throughout this time period, stories about accidental damage to civilian targets were far less frequent (119 stories). In fact, coverage of the refugees outnumbered coverage of civilian damage by a four to one margin before the bombing of the Chinese embassy (3/24-5/6). Following that event (5/7-5/25), however, coverage of civilian damage has doubled that of the refugees. Rounding out the top topics were stories regarding the three American POWs (104 stories).

A summary of coverage for each week of the war:

Week One: March 24-30 During the first week of the NATO bombing campaign, the networks aired 182 stories for just over four and a half hours of coverage. By contrast, in its first week, the Gulf



Kosovo News Topics Before and After Chinese Embassy Bombing



Note: n=number of stories.

Week Three: April 7-13 By week three, coverage began to wane (146 stories). A clear pattern in coverage emerged with the air war the leading topic of discussion (73 stories). The continuing Kosovar refugee problem (52 stories) was the second most discussed topic. NATO strategy (35 stories), ethnic cleansing (21 stories), and the American prisoners of war (21 stories) rounded out the coverage.

Week Four: April 14-20 Descriptions of the air war dominated more than half of the 116 stories on the continuing NATO campaign that aired on the networks' nightly newscasts (60 stories). The Serb reports that NATO had bombed a convoy of escaping Kosovar refugees put discussions of civilian damage into the picture (37 stories). NATO strategy remained prominent (37 stories) as did coverage of the

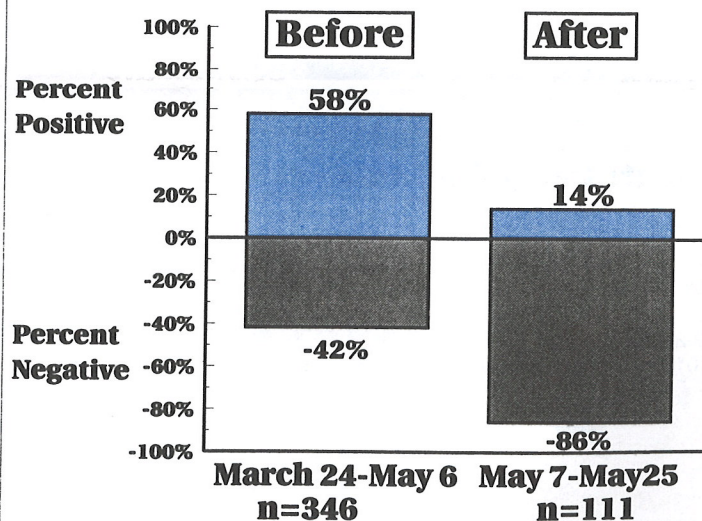
struggles facing the refugees (35 stories). Ever present in the coverage of this crisis was the

discussion of Serb ethnic cleansing (20 stories). The shooting rampage at Columbine High School in Littleton, CO on April 20th (22 stories) diverted media attention from the NATO campaign.

Week Five: April 21-27 Coverage of the war dropped to 59 stories, which were once again dominated by descriptions of the air war (37 stories) and debates over how to wage it (18 stories). However, the investigation into the shooting deaths at Columbine High School in Littleton, CO, received more than twice the number of stories than the war this week (134 stories).

Week Six: April 28-May 4 As in previous weeks, discussions of the air war dominated the coverage, a major topic in 37 of the 90 stories this week. But discussions of the three captured U.S. soldiers and their release from Serbia were also the feature of 37 stories. The next

Evaluations of U.S. Policy Before and After Chinese Embassy Bombing



Note: n=number of evaluations by news sources or reporters in NATO/Yugoslav conflict stories.

most heavily discussed topic was the ongoing diplomatic negotiations (16 stories).

Week Seven: May 5 - May 11

Coverage was about the same as week six, with 93 stories. Civilian damage topped the topic list for the first time because of the attention drawn by the accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade on May 7 (36 stories). The consistent coverage of the air war garnered 33 stories. Increasing attempts at a diplomatic solution to the conflict (25 stories).

Weeks Eight and Nine: May 12-May 25 The waning coverage of the war produced 91 stories during

this entire two-week period. The air war led the topic count (40 stories). Civilian damage (30 stories), NATO strategy, (21), refugees (19) and diplomacy (17) rounded out the leading topics.

Rating the Combatants

President Clinton has received mostly positive press for his handling of the crisis. Six out of ten on-air comments have contained praise for his efforts.

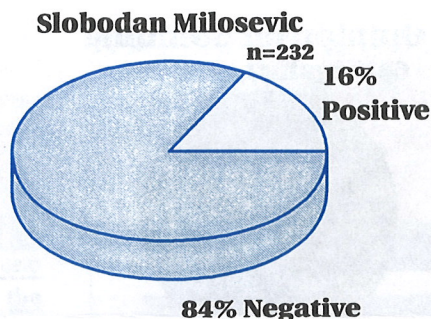
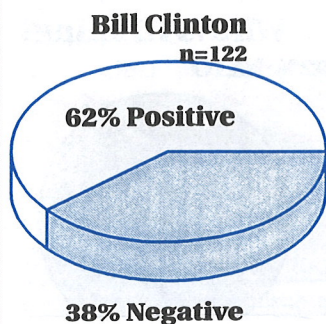
Nearly half of the positive evaluations (58) came from the President himself, as he defended NATO and U.S. policy. For example, NBC showed Mr. Clinton saying, "I believe we have quite a good chance of achieving our objectives." (3/31/99) Much of the criticism came from foreign sources. For example, a Serbian man shown on ABC said, "Not even Hitler did what Clinton is doing to us." (3/29/99)

However, he did have his critics at home. One scathing criticism came from Senator John McCain (R-AZ): "Publicly and repeatedly ruling out ground troops may be smart politics according to the president's pollster, but it is inexcusable and irresponsible leadership." (NBC, 5/3/99) Overall, Mr. Clinton's press has been even better than the coverage President George Bush received during the Gulf War (56% positive comments). CBS aired the most positive opinions of Mr. Clinton (70% positive); ABC aired opinions that were positive toward the President 62 percent of the time and opinions on NBC were 57 percent positive.

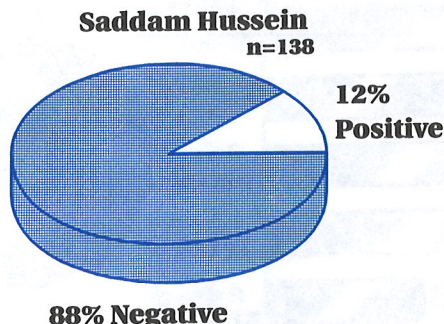
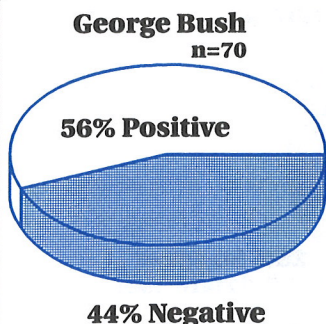
Not surprisingly, Slobodan Milosevic has received mostly negative press. Only one out of six (16%) on-air evaluations supported the Yugoslav president's policies and conduct. For example, Representative Sam Gejdenson (D-CT) was seen on ABC calling Milosevic "a brutal dictator who is murdering innocent people and chasing the rest off the land." (4/29/99) Nonetheless, Milosevic has fared slightly better than Saddam Hussein did during the Gulf War; the Iraqi president's evaluations ran seven to one negative.

Rating the Opponents

Kosovo-3/24-5/25/99



Gulf War-1/17-2/27/91



n=number of evaluations by sources and reporters on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts.

Overall opinions of American policy were less positive than personal evaluations of President Clinton. Just under half of all sources (48%) supported U.S. government policies. During most of the conflict, three out of five evaluations were favorable (58% positive from 3/24 to 5/6). Since the Chinese embassy bombing, however, six out of seven sources have panned U.S. policy (just 14% positive from 5/7 to 5/25). Sources on CBS were again the most positive of those seen on the three networks, offering support for the administration 56 percent of the time. NBC showed nearly equal amounts of criticism and praise (49% positive). On ABC, over three out of five sources offered negative evaluations of the administration (only 38% positive).

debate became more balanced, with 47 percent of sources offering support and 53 percent opposition. During week five, three out of four sources supported the operation (73% supportive). However, as the civilian damage increased, especially following the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, support for the bombing plummeted to only 18 percent favorable through the ninth week of the air campaign. Jesse Jackson was a prominent source during this time, as he won the release of the three American POWs. On NBC, Reverend Jackson expressed his views against the bombing, "This is war, and war is hell, and there's pain and there's violence, and we must break the cycle of it." (4/30/99)

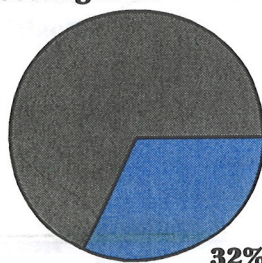
Overall, more than three out of five on-air sources said they thought NATO was winning the war (62%). Coverage of the "horse race" originally favored Serbia, then quickly shifted toward a more favorable assessment of NATO's prospects for achieving its goals. During the first week, 71 percent of sources favored Serbia's chances of prevailing. During weeks two through four, 62 percent of those offering an opinion saw NATO achieving its goals and only 38 percent thought that President Milosevic would endure. In weeks five through nine, the optimism over NATO's prospects jumped to 85 percent of on-air opinions. The three networks differed in their on-air assessments of NATO's success. On CBS, 76 percent of those

The Debate Over War

The debate over NATO military actions on the evening news has focused mainly on whether the bombing campaign is right or wrong, whether NATO bombing has been effective in achieving its stated goals, and whether ground troops should be sent in. Since the war began, more than two out of three sources have opposed the bombing campaign (68% opposed). However, opinion has shifted back and forth over the course of the war. In the first week of the operation, three out of four sources expressed opposition to the air strikes (74%). On CBS, Russian President Boris Yeltsin called the bombings "a strike against the whole international community." (3/24/99) During weeks two through four, the

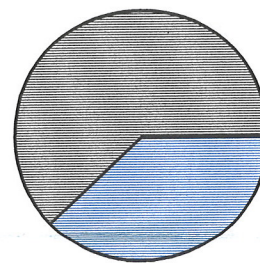
Terms of Debate

Opinion on Bombing
68% Against



32% For

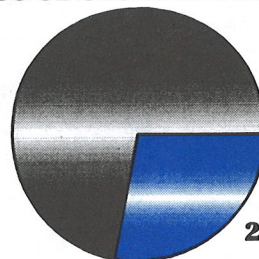
Who is Winning?
62% NATO



38% Serbia

Use of Ground Troops

72% Oppose



28% Support

Based on source viewpoints on the conflict itself,
rather than debate of U.S. policy

judging the effectiveness of NATO policy pronounced it a success. For example, CBS's John Roberts reported, "U.S. military officials say the intensified air strikes are indeed beginning to take a toll on Serbian forces." (4/6/99) On ABC, 61 percent thought NATO was achieving its goals. Sources on NBC were almost evenly divided on the success of the mission (49%).

A policy of sending in ground troops to push the Serb military out

of Kosovo has received little support from sources on the evening news. Overall, seven out of ten comments (70%) opposed the use of ground troops. That opinion was consistently expressed throughout the first nine weeks of the NATO air strikes. The debate over the necessity of ground troops varied among the networks. The most supportive balance of opinions was on CBS, where 46 percent of sources were in favor of sending in ground troops. On NBC and ABC,

most sources were against sending in troops (only 29% and 19% in favor respectively). For instance, ABC interviewed the Cato Institute's Ted Galen who opposes ground troops, "Somalia should certainly be an object lesson for anyone who suggests sending ground troops to Kosovo. That was a very bitter experience..." (3/31/99)

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