

**YOUNG PARLIAMENTARIANS' PROJECT  
SEMINAR 2  
SUMMARY REPORT**

By Sheila Cannon  
7 April 2000

*“The Interaction between those Actively Involved in Political Life and the Media in Western and Southeastern Europe”*

1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2000  
Thessaloniki, Greece

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**INTRODUCTION**

Overall, the second seminar of the Young Parliamentarians' Project was very successful. The speeches were all interesting, presented clearly, and relevant to the theme at hand. The discussions crescendoed at the end of each session as the subject was explored in more depth and as ideas built on each other.

The seminar lasted two days with two sessions of talks per day. The sessions were divided geographically: session one was about Greece and Northern Ireland; session two covered Great Britain, particularly the BBC; session three was about the media in Bulgaria and Albania, and session four was about the media in Serbia.

In the six countries represented by the seven speeches, the relationships in each case between those who are active in political life and the media roughly fell into two categories. In one category, politicians use the media to influence public opinion and thus advance their cause. In the second type of relationship, the reverse is true: public opinion, via the media, can influence political decisions.

The more common situation is that politicians use the media to influence public opinion. Within this category, the way that the politicians try to manipulate the public with the media can be divided again into two different, but ironically similar, groups. On the one hand, politicians in dictatorships or in new democracies of countries in Southeast Europe use the media in a heavy handed way to censor news and deliver propaganda. In Serbia, under the Milosevic regime the state television channels broadcast propaganda in order to encourage public support of the ruling regime, as discussed by **Stevan Niksic**. In Bulgaria, **Svetlana Lazarova** proved that the opinion in the newspapers sways towards the political persuasion of the ruling party. **Gens Tirana and Lutfi Dervishi** described the situation in Albania, where every newspaper is affiliated with a political party, either formally or informally. On the other hand, politicians in E.U. countries find creative and clever ways to manipulate the media to influence public opinion. In Greece, a system exists to sustain independence in the media, but politicians circumvent the rules by creative means. **Petros Papasarantopoulos** explained the media in Greece, a situation that is quite similar to that of other Balkan countries. In Great Britain, a system exists to which politicians adhere and which ensures independent media, as illustrated by **Glyn Mathias**. Despite the comprehensive system to guarantee impartial media coverage, **Nicholas Jones** explained how the present Labour government has managed to manipulate public opinion by supplying timely 'soundbites' that portray a news event in a way that casts the government in a favorable light.

The only example of public opinion deliberately influencing political decisions was in Northern Ireland. **Dr. Colin Irwin** explained the process of running public opinion polls in Northern Ireland. The polls reveal the opinions of the public and direct politicians to the possible route towards successful peace agreements in a divided society. Dr. Irwin's speech gave a nice balance to the talks, as he demonstrated a constructive and positive way in which the media can be used by the public. Mr. Mathias from the BBC also offered a possible way to prevent the media being used in a manipulative way by the government. The independent broadcasting of the BBC is written in a formal agreement with the government.

One of the reoccurring themes was the power of language. Language, sometimes along with images, can be used to influence, to control, to disguise, to deceive, to persuade, and seems to be a pan-European phenomenon. In Northern Ireland, negotiation of language was possibly the most challenging part of the peace process. Finding names to which all the parties agreed often took several months and could often block the entire peace process. Once the different parties agreed to the names of the different components, the language became a crucial part of the peace agreements, without which the agreements couldn't have worked. The British Labour government uses the power of language to put a spin on the news and manipulate the words that shape public opinion. The propaganda of governments who control electronic media demonstrates a use of language that is manipulative, and often powerful.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

Eight of the MP's were under 30 years old. All of the participants spoke English fluently, except two who needed some translations from their colleagues.

Sanja Kapetanovic from Croatia was 25 years old, the youngest parliamentarian in the Croatian Parliament. For Isidora Filipovic from Montenegro, the seminar was her first opportunity to travel outside of Montenegro. No MP's from Albania could attend because their national elections were taking place during the weekend of the seminar. Sonila Agako of Albania is training to be an MP. All three participants from Albania had extensive experience with the media and were knowledgeable about the standards of the media in Albania.

### **Speakers:**

Dr. Colin Irwin	Research Fellow, Queen's University of Belfast, Northern Ireland
Mr. Nicholas Jones	Correspondent and Author, BBC London, England
Ms. Svetlana Lazarova	Deputy Editor, Balkan Media Association, Sofia, Bulgaria
Mr. Glyn Mathias	Broadcaster and Manager, BBC Wales
Mr. Stevan Niksic	Editor-in-Chief of Nedeljne Informativne Novine (NIN) newsmagazine, Belgrade
Mr. Petros Papsarantopoulos	Publisher, Paratiritis, Thessaloniki, Greece
Mr. Genc Tirana	Editor-in-Chief of Republika Newspaper, Tirana, Albania

### **Audience:**

#### **Belgrade**

Jovan Surbatovic	Demochristian Party of Serbia
Marijana Trifunovic	Demochristian Party of Serbia

#### **Bucharest**

Corneliu Gavaliugov	Democratic Party
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#### **Podgorica**

Isidora Filipovic	People's Party of Montenegro
Irena Pavicevic	People's Party of Montenegro

#### **Skopje**

Nenad Ristovski	Democratic Party
Muhamed Tairi	Party of Democratic Prosperity of Albanians

#### **Sofia**

Emel Etem	Movement for Rights and Freedom
Ivan Todorov	Euroleft

#### **Tirana**

Sonila Agako	Deputy Chairwoman of Republica Organization
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Lutfi Dervishi                      Director of “Gazeto Albania”

**Zagreb**

Krunoslav Gasparic              Croatian Democratic Union

Sanja Kapetanovic              Social Democratic Party

**British Council, Thessaloniki**

Simon Milner, Director

**Athens News**

Kathryn Lukey-Coutsocostas, Thessaloniki Correspondent

## MEMORABLE QUOTES

“When you listen to Blair’s words, bear in mind the tragic scenes which we were being shown on our television screens, of whole communities of Kosovo refugees walking over hillsides and along railway lines to safety. This is what Mr. Blair said – and it is the epitome of a soundbite, reproduced word for word next day in every newspaper to justify those bombing raids by Nato’s warplanes: ‘Husbands taken from wives. Fathers taken from children, never to see them again, never knowing if they are dead or alive as they walk, mile upon mile to a safety they may never find. Old women humiliated, young men massacred, just for being Albanian, just for being there when the Serb killing machine arrived.’” Nicholas Jones, BBC Correspondent, London, 1/4/2000

“The Albanians were pleased with the news coverage of BBC World and CNN of the Kosovo conflict... It made Albania look good.” Lutfi Dervishi, Albania, 2/4/2000

“It looked straightforward. Bomb Milosevic into withdrawal. Then give Kosovo back to Kosovars. Victory. Yet with every successive visit I have paid to the region, the scene has grown more tangled, the task of those brave spirits called on to sort it out more daunting.” W.F. Deedes, *Kosovo Media*, 27/3/2000

“The situation in Serbia is most similar to the situation in a prison in which you are protesting against the prison wards. And there is no one who can help you. So that’s it.” Stevan Niksic, Belgrade, 2/4/2000

“Anytime you offer people the opportunity to exercise their democratic franchise, they always say yes. And it really puts the scares on the politicians.” Dr. Colin Irwin, Northern Ireland, 1/4/2000

“The continuous isolation of Serbia certainly does not help the democratic process.” Stevan Niksic, Belgrade, 2/4/2000

“20 - 30% of Albanians have access to printed media.” Gens Tirana, Albania, 2/4/2000

“The role and function of a political party is not compatible with ownership of media.” Petros Papasarantopoulos, Thessaloniki, 1/4/2000

“Truth is the first casualty of war.” Inscribed in the foyer of the Holiday Inn Hotel in Sarajevo.

“The American people should be proud that they did the right thing a year ago and confident that by working with our partners to consolidate the peace, they are doing the right and smart thing now.” Madeleine K. Albright, U.S. secretary of state, from her editorial article in The New York Times, 31/3/2000

## **SPEECHES**

### **Session 1**

Mr. Jens Reuter began the seminar with opening remarks, describing the activities of the Center for Democracy. Ms. Svetlana Lazarova chaired both sessions on the first day of the seminar. The first speaker of session 1 was Mr. Petros Papasasantopoulos, advisor to the Board of the Center for Democracy and the owner of a publishing house in Thessaloniki. The second speaker was Dr. Colin Irwin of the Institute of Irish Studies, Queen’s University of Belfast. Session 1 revealed a system in which politicians have managed to use the media to their own ends in Greece, and a project in which the public opinion via the media influenced political decisions in Northern Ireland.

#### **Petros Parasasantopoulos**

Mr. Papasasantopoulos explained the development of the media in the past two decades, and the current condition of the media in Greece. Probably the biggest event in Greek media during this period was in 1989 when Greece saw the deregulation of electronic media. From 1989 until the present day, a situation has developed in which politicians have under-the-table relationships with a media group. A channel or station often supports a political party either subtly, which is more effective, or overtly.

In the period between 1980 and 1989, there were no media groups in Greece. There was a state monopoly on electronic media; the media functioned like communicating vessels for political messages. There were 20 daily newspapers; political power was weak and, as a result, media played the role of influencing the politicians.

In 1989, the Greek government liberated electronic media. State monopolies were privatized. Rich businessmen from other fields bought the daily newspapers. In the last 10 years in Greece appeared the phenomenon of media groups.

There are all sorts of regulations in Greece, but there is a huge instance of piracy in both radio and television. A Greek law exists that no one can have 100% ownership of a television station. A station must have at least 4 owners, and no owner can have more than 25%. In practice, however, individuals use their family members, or false companies from abroad to have several theoretical owners, but one actual owner of a station. Gradually, the media changed from being communicating vessels for political messages, to being more like a triangle between mass media, economic power and political power.

## **Colin Irwin**

Dr. Irwin spoke about his work in Northern Ireland; he has been involved in producing, running, analyzing, and publishing the opinion polls that have been a vital part of the Northern Ireland peace processes. The principals of his work can be applied to any society and his methods, like any scientific method, can be precisely repeated. Dr. Irwin's work was a unique example of how public opinion can be expressed in the media and influence politicians and governments.

One of the major issues that the opinion polls addressed were names. As is often the case in a divided society, one group uses different names or terminology than the other group in the society. For example, the Republicans were not satisfied with 'The Royal Ulster Constabulary,' as the name of the police force in Northern Ireland; while the Unionists could not agree to change the name. While major issues like the disarming of paramilitary groups could be agreed on, the name changing issue was a much harder bridge to cross.

Dr. Irwin used the Belfast Telegraph to communicate the results of his survey to the public and politicians alike. One of the keys to the success of the opinion polls was the analysis of the polls and the ability to publish that analysis unconditionally. If the results of the opinion polls are given to the papers as plain statistics, each party will pick out the part of the results that supports their story.

The discussion that followed Dr. Irwin's talk, raised the issue of conducting opinion polls elsewhere. Ms. Lazarova suggested the idea of conducting polls in the deeply divided society of Kosovo. Dr. Irwin raised the idea of conducting opinion polls in Serbia in order to offer the international community a possible solution for peace and the integration of all Balkan countries in treaties and trade.

## **Session 2**

This session painted a full and thorough image of the way in which the British Media functions. On the one hand, the BBC has institutionalized laws that secure impartiality of news broadcasting. On the other side, the British Labour Government has used creative and punchy soundbites to shape the way in which the British public understands news events. A brief discussion followed each speech; the session concluded with an additional discussion primarily about the way in which the British media presented the recent war in Kosovo.

## **Glyn Mathias**

Mr. Mathias discussed the ways in which independence is sustained in broadcasting in the BBC. All broadcasts in Britain are regulated, either by a set of guidelines, such as the BBC has, or by the terms of the Broadcasting Act of 1990, as commercial broadcasters have.

The Broadcasting Act ensures due impartiality of commercial broadcasters through an Independent Television Commission and a Radio Authority. The BBC, although funded by a tax called the license fee, is not a state channel. It is self regulated and must adhere to the guidelines that are written in a 350 page document.

When reporting politics, the channel or station must give equal time to all the parties involved in a debate. Reporters can and often do subject a politician to rigorous

questioning, but the issue must be presented fairly. During elections, separate and specific rules apply. All candidates must be given equal time. Political advertising is not permitted in Britain, but the political parties are allowed unmediated airtime usually 5 minutes long, to address the public directly.

Overall, Mr. Mathias felt that the system is effective, but the regulations are too complex and need to be re-written.

### **Nicholas Jones**

Mr. Jones discussed the successful way in which the Blair government manipulates the British media by using catchy phrases, called soundbites, to influence the way in which the British public interprets news events. Journalists then write their stories using these soundbites which often are easy to quote and make for a sellable article. Using soundbites, or putting a spin on the news, the Blair government has gained great popularity by influencing what the British public hear and read in the news. Mr. Jones used the media coverage in Britain of the Nato airstrikes in the Former Republic of Yugoslavia to illustrate his point. He remarked that journalists in Western Europe now are beginning to reevaluate the Nato airstrikes, although the politicians are still saying, 'mission accomplished.'

Mr. Jones says that Prime Minister Tony Blair's closest advisor is his press secretary, Alastair Campbell. Mr. Campbell is a former journalist for the Daily Mirror and he is now known in Britain as a spin doctor. He obviously understands the media very well and knows how they will react in a given situation. Mr. Jones informs that Mr. Blair rarely makes a public appearance without Mr. Campbell.

During the recent war in Kosovo, Alastair Campbell and Tony Blair were successful in depicting the events in a way that was favorable to the Blair government. Mr. Jones says that if an opinion poll were taken in Britain today, possibly as much as 80% of the British population would say that Tony Blair did the right thing, that the mission was successful.

The audience was obviously very interested in hearing the soundbites that the Blair government fed the British public. An animated discussion followed the two talks about the way in which the Nato airstrikes were depicted in England. For many audience members, this talk was the first time they had heard this interpretation or spin of the recent war.

### **Session 3**

Mr. Stevan Niksic chaired Session 3 which consisted of talks by Ms. Svetlana Lazarova, Mr. Gens Tirana, and Mr. Lutfi Dervishi. The audience heard a detailed account of the media and its interaction with politics in Bulgaria and in Albania.

#### **Svetlana Lazarova**

Ms. Lazarova explained the situation in Bulgaria in which the media is not successfully regulated, and that the ruling party has excessive influence on the electronic and printed media. In Bulgaria, an MP has recently said, "Television follows the winners." In other words, electronic media aligns itself with the opinion on the ruling party.

Ms. Lazarova described the situation in Bulgaria in which the state channel is dominant, and the private channels have lower budgets, thus lower quality programs. Like in Greece, there is a large instance of radio and TV piracy. Bulgaria, with a population of 8.5 million, has both public and private media. However, only the public electronic media has national coverage; the private channels and stations only have local coverage and cannot afford the programming that the public electronic media broadcasts.

There are no laws to regulate printed media in Bulgaria. The two newspapers with the highest circulation are German owned. They are tabloid style papers. There are three other major news papers in Bulgaria: one which is published by the state, one which is produced by the current ruling political party, the Union of Democratic Forces, and one which is produced by a socialist party.

### **Gens Tirana and Lutfi Dervishi**

Both of these men gave a short speech about the media in Albania. Each speech was followed by a brief question and answer session, and the morning was concluded with a final discussion about the lack of coverage of other countries of the Balkan region by the Albanian media.

Gens Tirana depicted a situation in Albania in which there are only theoretical divisions between newspapers affiliated with a political party and newspapers that are private. Albania is very far from having independent media because there is no tradition of impartial media and the financial resources do not exist to support alternative papers.

The production of newspapers is concentrated in the capital of Albania. As a result, the majority of the population has no access to printed media. Newspapers do not reach all parts of Albania because of poor road quality and limited financial resources.

Lutfi Dervishi gave a comprehensive view of the problems that journalists face in Albania. There is a lack of training and education for journalists; Albanian journalists, he says, are young and inexperienced. There are no regulations and no standards; he calls the situation chaotic.

Ownership of private radio stations is a growing business in Albania. A new radio station opens every 3 weeks, a business trend that is driven by emotion rather than commercial consideration. Those involved in journalism are frustrated and angry at the paralyzed economic environment, lack of equipment, and the poor quality of broadcasting.

The discussion that followed the talks covered the Albanian experience during the Kosovo war. Mr. Dervishi supplied interesting and informed answers to the audience's questions. When Western journalists came to Albania, they could easily hire an Albanian journalist and Albanian journalism suffered as a result. An average salary for an Albanian journalist is US\$ 150-200 per month.

In general, the Albanians were pleased with the international news coverage of the Kosovo crisis. Mr. Dervishi said, "It made Albania look good." An impoverished

country with a population of 3 million gave refuge to 500,000 Albanian Kosovars. According to a survey carried out by the Association of Professional Journalists of Albania, during the airstrikes, about 70-80% of Albanian newspapers were devoted to covering the conflict. The government newspapers supported the KLA paramilitary group in Kosovo. Tony Blair and Bill Clinton were frequently on the front cover of the newspapers. In the author's opinion, considering Mr. Jones depiction of the news spin that the media told, the Albanian Kosovars were cast in the role of innocent victim having to face the "Serbian killing machine," in a story that was a distortion of the reality in Kosovo.

Mr. Niksic asked about how the Albania media covers events in neighboring countries. Mr. Dervishi replied that Albanian media cannot afford to have correspondents in foreign countries. The only way Albania receives news from other Balkan countries, is via international news sources.

#### **Session 4**

Mr. Jens Reuter chaired session 4 which consisted of a speech by Mr. Stevan Niksic. Mr. Niksic discussed the media in Serbia, its oppression by the Milosevic regime, and his experience as Editor-in-Chief of NIN newsmagazine.

#### **Stevan Niksic**

Mr. Niksic described the limitation of the press in Serbia under the Milosevic regime. There are both private and public owned media in Serbia. The state run television channel, RTS is controlled by the regime and transmits propaganda. Some of the city or local stations are affiliated with political parties, but some are independent; all the local channels are independent from the regime. Since 1996 when the ruling party lost the local elections in Serbia, Mr. Milosevic no longer had control over the local broadcasting. However, when local channels transmit news broadcasts, other carefully programmed transmitters jam the frequencies making it almost impossible to watch any news. Mr. Milosevic initially states that Nato is jamming the frequencies, but the independent channels have detected the transmitters on Serbian government buildings within Belgrade.

The message of the current propaganda on the state channels has recently changed. At the beginning of the regime, the programs were intended to stimulate strong nationalistic emotions. Mr. Niksic said that the regime now uses the media to de-politicize the public. The message is this: the regime may not be the ideal one, but the other options are no better and maybe even worse. So sit back and watch the entertainment. "The message is to listen to the music, and entertainment. Forget the politics, and the regime will try to make everything good," reports Mr. Niksic. He says that the main concern of the regime now is to persuade people not to vote, that it is a waste of time to vote.

Marjiana Trifunovic described the state TV channel, which is called Pink TV. This channel provides a rosy view of the world with good entertainment all day. Mr. Niksic said that the other channels cannot compete with the programming of the state channels, which show all the best Western movies and serials.

Finally, Mr. Niksic describes some instances in which he has been put in jail and fined because of the content of his newsmagazine, NIN. The editor is held responsible for

any material printed. Even if a newspaper reports the opinion of someone else, such as in an interview, the editor is liable for the opinions published.

The final discussion of the seminar extended past the scheduled time. Mr. Reuter made brief closing remarks, as time did not allow for lengthy speech.

## **CONCLUSION**

The general response to the seminar, particularly regarding the content of the speeches and discussions, was overwhelmingly positive.